

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE



The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel

HELD ON TUESDAY 23 JULY 2024 AT 6.30 PM
VIRTUAL MEETING VIEWABLE BY WEBLINK

Present:

Councillor Barry Wood (Chair), Councillor James Barlow, Councillor Besmira Brasha, Councillor John Broad, Councillor Andy Cooke, Councillor Tiago Corais, Councillor Debby Hallett, Councillor Charlie Hicks, Councillor Theodore Jupp, Councillor Alex Powell, Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Councillor Sandra Simpson, Councillor Emily Smith and Councillor David Turner

Officers contributing to and supporting the Panel:

Emma Coles	Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership Manager
Andrew Down	Future Oxfordshire Partnership Director
Chloe Edwards	Local Nature Recovery Strategy Project Manager, Oxfordshire County Council
Susan Harbour	Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Kevin Jacob	Democratic Services Officer – Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Valerie Lambrechts	Infrastructure Portfolio Manager, Oxfordshire County Council
Amber Lyford	Assistant Democratic Services Officer, Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Babatunde Ogundele	Assistant Democratic Services Officer, Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Mark Saunders	Energy Systems and Investment Manager, Oxfordshire County Council
Paul Staines	Interim Head of Programme - Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal
Kathy Wilcox	Head of Financial Strategy, Oxfordshire County Council
Matt Whitney	Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager

1. Election of Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Panel for 2024/2025

Councillor Charlie Hicks proposed, and Councillor John Broad seconded, Councillor Barry Wood as Chair of the Panel. There being no other nominations, the nomination was agreed after being put to a vote.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Barry Wood be elected as Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel for 2024/2025 year.

Councillor Barry Wood proposed, and Councillor Debby Hallett seconded Councillor Charlie Hicks as Vice-Chair of the Panel. There being no other nominations, the nomination was agreed after being put to a vote.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Charlie Hicks be elected as Vice-Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Scrutiny Panel for 2024/2025 year.

2. Apologies for absence, substitutes; declarations of interest, Chair's announcements

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Michael Brooker, West Oxfordshire District Council.

It was noted that Councillor Julian Cooper was no longer a representative of West Oxfordshire District Council leading to a vacancy and that there remained a vacancy in the representation of Oxfordshire County Council.

Councillor Alex Powell declared a non-pecuniary interest in the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP) update item on the grounds he was an employee of Oxford Brookes University which is a contributor to an OIEP research project.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2024 were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

4. Public participation

Kevin Jacob, Senior Democratic Services Officer, Future Oxfordshire Partnership read out the following question from Councillor Richard Parker on behalf of Shirburn Parish Council:

Shirburn Parish Council (SPC) is a key stakeholder in the Watlington Relief Road (WRR) scheme and the parish is severely impacted by the proposed project.

The proposed WRR does not have planning consent and the application lodged by Oxfordshire County Council under Ref R3.0010/24 is the subject of a significant Reg 25 Request and in itself will require further public consultation.

SPC are therefore particularly concerned to note within the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal: Update at the End of Quarter 4 2023/24 at Para 3.2 "Scheme Delivery update and Risk Management" and Para 3.2.4 that there is reference to the WRR and that a planning decision is anticipated later this year.

There does not appear to be any minuted previous discussion on the proposed WRR for which there is no planning approval and the scheme even if approved cannot be constructed before 31st March 2025 at which point funding via DLUHC will expire.

The Future Oxfordshire Partnership is being asked to note a number of schemes which do have planning permission, or which are not dependant on planning permission and some

that have identified a step change in housing delivery, and which are competing for funding and it therefore appears to SPC that the FOP Scrutiny Panel are being asked to accept a significant risk for an unconsented scheme.

There is no transparency as to why this scheme has appeared before the Panel nor any updated and current construction cost to compare with the budgeted cost. The current Annexe 1 HGD presented to the Committee Meeting on the 23 July 2024 shows no "Procurement Contract" has been signed and that the "Appoint Contractor" is to "tbc" whereas the same Annexe presented to the last Committee Meeting showed a "Procurement Contract" signed in March 2022 and the "Appoint Contractor" in October 2023.

Shirburn Parish Council request that the Panel investigates the WRR proposal carefully as this is an unconsented and uncosted scheme taking funding from other consented schemes in the County.

Verbal response given at the meeting.

The Quarter 4 report provides an update on all of the schemes that are wholly, or part funded by the Housing & Growth Deal. Watlington Relief Road has been in the programme since 2020 so the report provides an update on this as at the end of March 2024. It is part funded through the Housing & Growth Deal so only the H&GD element would need to be spent by 31 March 2025.

The report notes that the scheme is subject to a planning decision later in 2024 and that:

- 3.2.4 The planning decision for Watlington Relief Road is anticipated later this year. Work is ongoing to assess the impact of this and the ongoing deliverability of the scheme.
- 3.2.5 A final update on the schemes will be shared with Future Oxfordshire Partnership as part of the report for Quarter 1 of 2024/2025 in September 2024.

Pending the outcome of the planning decision, Oxfordshire County Council is currently assessing the impact of this on the deliverability of the scheme as well as updates to other schemes in the programme where there is on-going activity and will agree updates through its governance process.

To clarify that in relation to the procurement process for the Watlington Relief Road, reference to a contractor meant the procurement of a design consultant to fully design the scheme. This had taken place whereas a building contractor has not yet been appointed.

[A final version of the question and response can be found here.](#)

5. Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal: Update at the end of Quarter 4 2023/24

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership that set out progress and spend for schemes included as part of the Housing and Growth Deal as at end of Quarter Four, 2023/2024. Kathy Wilcox, Head of Financial Strategy at Oxfordshire County Council and Valerie Lambrechts, Infrastructure Portfolio Manager introduced the report and highlighted that:

- 2024/2025 was the final year of the Housing from Infrastructure, (Hfi) Programme funding as part of the Housing and Growth Deal.
- In accordance with the governance arrangements agreed with HM Government in 2022, Oxfordshire County Council was the accountable body for the financial management of the remaining two Housing and Growth Deal financial streams.
- As of Quarter 4 2023/2024, total Hfi Programme spending had been £86.5m with £20.5m spent in 2023/2024.
- To utilise all the remaining Hfi Programme grant funding, a total of £56.3m needed to be spent during 2024/2025.
- An additional allowance of £1.5m towards safety audits had been agreed with HM Government and this could be used for this purpose after March 2025.
- Considering the deadline for the use of grant funding Hfi schemes had been prioritised towards scheme at the construction phase of delivery that could achieve the grant funding deadline, or which had access to other sources of funding that could be accessed after the grant deadline. The list of schemes listed in the appendices reflected this.
- The Hfi Programme had been over-profiled by £1.6m to allow for as much grant funding as possible to be utilised and it was expected this would reduce over the coming financial year as scheme contingencies were applied.
- As of Quarter 4 2023/2024, a total of £1.159m remained of the Growth Deal Capacity Funding with expenditure during 2024/2025 of £0.115m. Several schemes to utilise remaining funding were being developed to business case stage and if the cases were all agreed it was expected that most of the funding would be committed.
- Remaining recycled funds totalling £26.2m as of Quarter 4 2023/2024 would need to be fully utilised in 2024/2025 before any further grant funding could be claimed.
- Given the proximity to the end of the programme every effort was being made to minimise risk.
- Construction was ongoing on the Benson Relief Road, Wantage Eastern Link Road, Kidlington Roundabout, Banbury Road Roundabout.
- Construction of the North Oxford Corridor scheme in Cassington had been completed earlier in the year.
- Construction contracts had been entered into for Lodge Hill with work expected to commence in October 2024 and at Steventon in September 2024.
- A planning decision on the Watlington Relief Road was expected later this year and ongoing consideration was being given to the deliverability of the scheme.
- A final update on schemes as of Quarter 1 2024/2025 would be provided at the next Future Oxfordshire Partnership meeting.

In Panel's discussion, it was suggested that based on the report and information available the level of risk to the deliverability of schemes was low, but that notwithstanding this it might be prudent to explore whether any of the deadlines might be extended by HM Government. However, officers responded that although such a conversation was possible, it was very unlikely that the Government would agree.

Regarding the Watlington Relief Road scheme, the Panel was informed that since the submission of a planning application in 2023 extensive consultations had been undertaken with around 52 objections being raised as part of the formal processes that applied. These detailed objections had to be worked through and considered carefully. It was currently expected that a decision would be made by the planning authority around October-November 2024 and the County Council remained committed to the scheme.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that governance of the Hfl Programme sat with Oxfordshire County Council for the allocation of remaining Growth Deal funding, and this included associated risks. Several members commented that given the responsibility of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and the Panel was limited it was important to ensure that effective scrutiny of the Hfl Programme took place with the County Council's own Overview and Scrutiny and audit arrangements and did not fall between the different organisations. Officers undertook to investigate and seek appropriate advice, commenting that the Hfl Programme formed part of the County Council's own capital governance process.

Councillor Cooke commented that whilst he understood that the Milton Heights Pedestrian and Cycle bridge had been removed from the programme there remained an acute need for the works to be funded. He asked what the funding update was for this and other schemes that been removed. Officers reiterated that schemes had only been removed where it was felt they could not be delivered within the programme's timescales and that every effort continued to be made to secure alternative sources of funding. They remained priority schemes.

In response to the potential use of Housing and Growth Deal Net Capacity funding to support schemes such as Local Area Energy Planning officers commented that these schemes would help to remove barriers to the delivery of housing consistent with the principles of the Housing and Growth Deal. Andrew Down as FOP Director commented that in addition to facilitating housing delivery, some of the proposed projects linked back to the productivity strand of the Housing and Growth Deal and there was sufficient flexibility within the overall conditions attached to the use of the budget.

In respect of the completion of the Eynsham Park and Ride it was clarified that this formed part of a larger scheme. A proportion of the total cost of the scheme came had come from Hfl funding with additional funding from the Department for Transport.

Officers commented that they did have a reasonable level of confidence on the use of Hfl funding as spending was now significantly increasing as schemes moved forward into construction.

A number of members commented that they felt that the principles of Active Travel set out in the latest version of the County Councils Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, (LTCP) had not been reflected in the Hfl programme. It was clarified that the terms of the Hfl had been set and agreed in 2018 linked to the delivery of additional housing.

RESOLVED: That the update to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be noted.

6. Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP) Update Report

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership which provided an update on the delivery of the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership's, (OIEP) four strategic priorities of Educational Attainment, Inclusive Employment, Social Value and Procurement and Place Shaping.

Emma Coles, OIEP Manager highlighted that:

- It had been possible for the OIEP to contribute towards two research projects. One project undertaken by the University of Oxford Community Fellows Programme had a focus upon the development of best practice for Community Hubs. The second headed by Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford had looked at developing a Theory of Change and an evaluation framework to measure the Partnership's impact. Together this amounted to around £90,000 of in-kind assistance.
- An intern from the University of Oxford would be helping to support the partnership from August 2024.
- A summit on improving Early Years Provision was to be held in the Autumn of 2024 which would include practitioners, academics and businesses.
- The OIEP was jointly funded by the Oxfordshire principal local authorities but was a collective of stakeholders from across the public, private, academic and third sector organisations.

In discussion, the Chair and Panel members welcomed the report which it was felt set out the important and necessary work the OIEP was undertaking particularly regarding refugees and prison leavers.

Reference was made to the need for vocational training especially in areas such green technologies and retrofit where there was a lack of trained workers. It was felt that this could also potentially have a positive impact on inclusivity as such opportunities might be particularly attractive to students with less academic backgrounds.

Regarding training and support to ex-offenders, many of whom were being released earlier than their sentence without having had access to a full programme of training, it was noted that Bullingdon Prison had a particular specialism as a remand centre and operated an employment hub to help prisoners find employment.

Several members commented that linking back to the [Oxfordshire Strategic Vision](#), the outcomes of the OIEP did not appear to include the expected overarching economic and other shocks from the climate emergency and asked how the OIEP might be able to assist with the building of community adaptive capability as often such skills were not particularly academic. Working across communities in this way would be inclusive. In response, Emma Coles stated that the need to link back to communities and community engagement was recognised and the OIEP had been building capacity in this area over the last 18 months in terms of its delivery focus.

In response to another question, it was recognised that real life case studies were powerful tools to explain the work of the OIEP and engagement with it.

RESOLVED: That the update to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be noted.

7. Update on the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Panel considered a paper to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership that set out an update on the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, (LNRS) and the plan to go to public consultation. The paper was introduced by Chloe Edwards, Local Nature Recovery Strategy Project Manager, Oxfordshire County Council and Matt Whitney, Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager. [A presentation was given to the Panel](#) setting out key points.

In discussion, the Panel strongly supported the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. However, it acknowledged that many issues of public concern flagged as part of its public consultation, such as water quality, sat outside of the scope of the LNRS and suggested to officers that it was important that there be suitable communications to the public to explain where issues could not be considered in the context of the LNRS so as to seek to ensure that the public did not feel their concerns were being ignored.

Officers responded that that they fully acknowledged the need to be clear in the public consultation around what was and what was not within the scope of the LNRS.

Concerns were also raised that in some areas of the county, biodiversity was decreasing with amongst other challenges, streams affected by a covering of slime and that the number of red kites was now having an adverse effect on other species. Officers commented that matters in relation to specific species would be picked up within the species prioritisation and management technique elements of the plan.

Other areas raised by members included the role of wildlife movement corridors and roadside verges as wildlife corridors and the LNRS's role. It was noted that the draft LNRS was not intended to be prescriptive in this area and its role was limited, but verges would be included in mapping work undertaken as part of the plan's development and best practice promoted with the goal of improving verges as habitats. The importance of wildlife connectivity was understood and would be reflected in the plan.

Councillor John Broad commented that many of the areas of public concern that were outside of the scope of the LNRS related to local planning and land use such as housing and the development of solar farms. There was a need to take account of the impacts of the climate and bio-diversity emergencies and housing growth as part of the LNRS. Officers responded that the Oxfordshire Nature Partnership had lobbied the previous government to strengthen the required regard given to LNRSs in the context of planning authority local plans but had not been successful. The new government had recently published a [joint letter from the Secretaries of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government and Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to environmental nature conversation organisations concerning the Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), which had indicated the government intended to consider planning and the environment in a joined up way, but the weight given to the LNRS would be a matter for individual local planning authorities to determine in the context of the National Planning Policy Framework. However, there was confidence that within Oxfordshire, local officers involved in local plan drafting had a good level of understanding of the LNRS.

It was also not possible for the LNRS to comment on specific planning applications.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the update to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be noted.
- 2) That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be informed of that the Panel strongly supported the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. However, it acknowledged that there are many issues of public concern flagged as part of its previous public consultation, such as water quality, that sit outside of the scope of the LNRS and suggested to officers that it was important that there be suitable communications to the public to explain where issues could not be considered in the

context of the LNRS so as to seek to ensure that the public did not feel their concerns were being ignored.

8. Advisory Group updates

(a) Infrastructure Advisory Group update

RESOLVED: The Panel received the notes of the Infrastructure Advisory Group held on 12 March and 6 June 2024.

(b) Planning Advisory Group update

RESOLVED: The Panel received the notes of the Planning Advisory Group held on 15 March 2024.

9. Work programme for the Scrutiny Panel

The Panel considered its work programme as set out in the agenda.

In discussion, various members of the Panel made suggestion as to the Panel's operation and asked questions of clarification regarding specific items of interest.

Councillor Emily Smith suggested that in terms of agenda management and the most effective use of the limited meeting time available, reports where there was an opportunity for the Panel to respond to specific recommendations to the FOP and make its own comments and recommendations should be prioritised over items to note or items presented for update only.

The Chair commented that he was happy to take this approach moving forward.

Councillor Smith also asked why the current agenda had not included an item on a proposed Memorandum of Understanding, (MoU) between Oxfordshire County Council and the districts concerning the transition of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, (OxLEP) functions to the County Council given an item had been listed in previous iterations of the forward work programme. Andrew Down, Future Oxfordshire Partnership Director responded that the draft memorandum had been withdrawn by the County Council as not all district partners had been ready to agree it. Work on the transition arrangements up to September 2024 would continue and it was considered that a further report would be submitted to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, (FOP) in the future, but ultimately this would be a question for Oxfordshire County Council to determine.

Several other members of the Panel stated that they felt that given the importance of the transition of OxLEP's functions to the County Council there should be a further paper to the FOP and the Panel on the proposed arrangements.

In addition, it was felt that the Panel should be informed and given an opportunity to comment of any proposals to the FOP around potential devolution to the county from HM Government and the outcomes of the review of the FOP itself.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the work programme be noted.

- 2) That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be informed that the Panel notes the work being undertaken at an Oxfordshire level around devolution and changes to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership. The Panel considered that this could have a material impact on the future and role and remit of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel and requested that it be consulted in advance around devolution and proposed changes to the Partnership and its scrutiny arrangements.
- 3) On the basis that the outcome of the review process was that the Scrutiny Panel should be retained, it was felt that two areas of support would help. First consideration of Scrutiny training similar to that arranged by individual Councils. Second, an organised schedule of FOP Advisory Group Chairs updating the Panel on progress.

10. Oxfordshire Local Area Energy Plan - Outline business case

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, (FOP) which referenced the final version of the Oxfordshire Local Area Energy Plan, (OxLAEP) Programme Scope and which presented the OxLAEP Outline Business Case, (OBC). Mark Saunders, Energy Systems and Investment Manager, Oxfordshire County Council introduced the report and gave a [presentation summarising key points](#).

It was noted that the FOP was being asked to consider four possible options with Option Four as detailed on agenda page 56 the recommended decision. This was for full development of the OxLAEP programme and ongoing LAEP function including the suggested mitigations related to district council resource requirements and approval by the FOP of an addition £450,000 of funding in addition to the £150,000 previously approved.

A summary of the detailed comments and suggestions made by the Panel is presented below:

- There was a role for coordination and roll out of local area energy planning at a national level through National Grid, particularly so in light of the expected increase in local sources of local generation. This would allow for costs to be recovered via the costs of energy whereas OxLAEP proposals required a commitment of £600,000 plus what was felt to be an ongoing heavy cost without a clear mechanism for recovery of that cost. Doubt was expressed that HM Government would fund local area energy planning on an ongoing basis.
- There was a need to know the amount of nationally generated energy via offshore wind and nuclear power coming into the Oxfordshire grid and to plan ahead to 2050 taking into account all the expected changes in generation away from fossil fuels, adaption and other detailed considerations including changes in energy use and demand.
- Retrofit of existing homes would be required and the timing of decisions by individual householders was crucial to energy planning, but local authorities had few levers to influence retrofit.
- Some concern was expressed regarding the costs of consultancy, and it was felt that this could have been implemented sooner in the development of project building up in-house skills for the future, if it had been set up in stages.
- It was important for the benefits of energy generation to come back to local communities if their support for local energy infrastructure was to be secured.
- The move to generation closer to the point of use was to be welcomed and it was suggested that this should be via roof top solar with battery storage on existing buildings such as car parks rather than solar farms.

- The inclusion of natural gas was queried, but it was noted that gas would be part of the energy mix for some time because of heating needs.
- Notwithstanding the mitigation measures set out in the report which were welcomed, several members felt these did not completely allay their concerns regarding funding and the impact of supporting OxLAEP on district officer capacity.
- Concern was expressed that there could be an impact on Local Plan progress resulting from the development of OxLAEP.
- Funding – what budget was the proposed £600,000 coming from?

In response to these points and questions, it was confirmed by Andrew Down that the proposed spend would if approved, come from the residual amount of the Housing and Growth Deal Net Capacity fund that was held by the County Council as the accountable body and which the FOP itself had authority to take decisions on how to use. The cost to districts in supporting the OxLAEP process would be support in kind subject to the mitigations in the report.

Appropriate legal advice had been sought from the Monitoring Officer of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and they had indicated the OxLAEP should not interfere with Local Plan processes.

In response to other points raised, Mark Saunders commented that a Regional Electricity System Planner had been set up. This was a new function set up by HM Government to look at regional electricity strategy, but it would not be producing plans for localities. Work undertaken within Oxfordshire would contribute to the decisions of this body around network investment. National Grid would retain statutory responsibility for energy transmission. Opportunity remained for Oxfordshire as a system to shape local provision and LAEPs would need to be reviewed on a regular basis. The LAEP set out what steps and projects were needed but they would not identify who would do them.

Each LAEP would lead to the drawing up of a list of required projects that would be required to get to the County's decarbonisation objectives, taking account of economic objectives and other factors.

The decision had been taken to seek to proceed with all the LAEPs within the county at the same time with the help of consultants rather than follow an incremental approach utilising in house expertise because of the need to gain a strategic overview of the whole county.

It was noted that it would be likely that coming out of the LAEP process there would be an increase in community led projects where any returns could be returned to those communities, but this could not be stipulated within the LAEP, and it depend on the individual project.

Finally, it was stressed that a collaborative process involving both district council and county council officers, representatives of the Distribution Network Operators, and OxLEP had been followed in the development of the LAEP and the Outline Business Case. The proposed stage gates and mitigations within the proposals had been designed to allow for districts to have comfort about resource requirements and move at a different pace if they wished to.

The Chair referred to the potential impact of the expected revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework and the potential implications of that on both Local Plans and LAEP.

After further discussion, Officers were thanked for a comprehensive and helpful report.

RESOLVED: That subject to the following comments, the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be recommended by the Panel to approve Option Four of the OxLAEP Outline Business Case:

1. Funding and district council resources: -The Panel had significant concerns regarding officer capacity at a district level to support the LAEP process. The Panel was pleased and reassured to note options to mitigate this had been built into the proposals as set out in para 16 of the covering report, including the intended go/no go stage gates after at Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the procurement process and support from Oxfordshire County Council with clienting duties. The Panel regards these mitigations and the flexibility of districts to proceed at different speeds as of high importance.
2. Impact of OxLAEP process on individual district Local Plans: The Panel had serious concerns that the LAEP process could delay Local Plan adoption timelines, but noted the response from officers that the proposals should not interfere with the Local Plan process.
3. Use of consultants and building of 'in house' LAEP expertise – the Panel noted that there was a need in the short term to procure consultants to assist the LAEP development but was strongly of the view that in the longer-term in-house expertise needed to be developed on cost and resilience grounds.
4. That in seeking to encourage the delivery of more local energy generation capacity within Oxfordshire, everything possible be done to ensure that any profits from projects come back to the local communities.

11. Dates of next meetings

The Panel noted the dates of future meetings as set out in the agenda.

In conclusion the Chair added that he had noted the comments made regarding item ordering and length of the meeting and that as a matter of style moving forward, his aim would be to conclude all meetings within two hours prioritising any substantive items.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm