

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE



The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel

HELD ON TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2024 AT 6.30 PM
VIRTUAL MEETING VIEWABLE BY WEBLINK

Present:

Councillor Barry Wood (Chair), Councillor John Broad, Councillor Andy Cooke, Councillor Tiago Corais, Councillor Ali Gordon-Creed, Councillor Debby Hallett, Councillor Charlie Hicks, Councillor Bob Johnston, Councillor Alex Powell, Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Councillor Carl Rylett, Councillor Sandra Simpson, Councillor Emily Smith and Councillor David Turner

Officers contributing to and supporting the Panel:

Becky Chesshyre	Communications Lead – Oxfordshire Partnerships
Arianne Crampton	Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership and Programme Manager, Oxfordshire County Council
Andrew Down	Future Oxfordshire Partnership Director
Kevin Jacob	Democratic Services Officer – Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Valerie Lambrechts	Infrastructure Portfolio Manager - Oxfordshire County Council
Babatunde Ogundele	Assistant Democratic Services Officer – Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Paul Staines	Future Oxfordshire Partnership – Programme Manager

Other councillors: Councillor Liz Leffman, Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and Leader of Oxfordshire County Council.

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

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor James Barlow, South Oxfordshire District Council, (substituted by Councillor Ali Gordon-Creed) and Michael Brooker, West Oxfordshire District Council.

There were no declarations of interest.

The Chair indicated that Councillor Liz Leffman, Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and Leader of Oxfordshire County Council was a guest speaker for discussion of the Partnership Reset report.

13. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

14. Public participation

It was noted that on this occasion there were no public speakers.

15. Future Oxfordshire Partnership Reset

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership which summarised recent discussions about the future purpose and scope of partnership working within Oxfordshire and which presented an interim position for endorsement by the Partnership. It requested that officers develop the plans in more detail along with revised terms of reference.

Councillor Liz Leffman, Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership attended the meeting and introduced the report, responding to questions from Panel members. She spoke to the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal as the foundation of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, the Partnership's predecessor body, and how the current governance arrangements had been put in place to support and monitor the Deal. As the Deal came to end in March 2025, discussion had been taking place as to what the role of the Partnership should be in the future.

It was felt that through the Partnership, the Oxfordshire local authorities and partners had worked well in collaboration and that in the future there would be several areas which needed consideration on a countywide basis, including but not limited to, strategic infrastructure, nature recovery and transition to Net Zero. The continuation of a mechanism for the Leaders of the Councils to come together and discuss these issues was felt to be high importance, but it was intended to refocus the Partnership as a formal joint committee of Leaders only, notwithstanding the important contributions external partners had made to the Partnership's work. Engagement with those partners would continue.

Local Government devolution was area where there was a need for Leaders to collectively consider a potential way forward regarding HM Government's proposals that might also include discussion around reshaping governance structures in Oxfordshire itself.

It was stressed to the Panel that the high-level proposals set out in the report represented current thinking and remained work in progress, with a number of issues including the desirability of establishing sub-committees and their possible remits outstanding.

The Panel undertook a detailed discussion of the report with a range of views expressed. A summary of the main points raised is set out below:

- That there needed to be clarity around legal responsibility for any decision-making powers delegated to the joint committee and that if such powers were delegated to it there would be a need and requirement for a formal statutory overview and scrutiny

committee with its own full legal powers. Regardless of the exact legal position, it was felt overview and scrutiny should be central in the proposed governance arrangements.

- Rather than seeking to find a new purpose for the Partnership as proposed in the report, there was a need to explore and challenge whether there was a need for a joint committee to exist at all. Strategic issues could be considered by Leaders as when they arose.
- The paper did not set out estimated costs for the operation of the joint committee, despite the need to reduce costs and reduce bureaucracy where it was not needed. Although there was reference in the report to the shared costs of the core Partnership support team, no information had been provided regarding the costs to each individual council of officer time in supporting the Partnership or a refocused joint committee.
- Given the pressure on finances it was important to be clear as to the value added by the Partnership in addition to other existing cross Oxfordshire bodies such as the Local Nature Partnership or Inclusive Economy Partnership. Officers from across the councils were and had always shared information and best practice.
- The situation about HM Government's proposals for devolution and local reorganisation was unclear at the time of the meeting and that it was felt premature to develop proposals for what the joint committee might do.
- Some members of the Panel expressed significant concern regarding qualified majority decision making and commented that the terms of reference of the revised joint committee should specify that unanimity of all the authorities would be required for decisions.
- That strategic planning policy including housing need was entirely within the remit of district councils through the sovereignty of their Local Plans. Strategic planning should be specifically excluded in the revised terms of reference from the joint committee's remit and role.
- That any proposals for economic growth and investment needed to be consistent with the sustainable principles of the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision and based on GVA per capita.
- There was a need for discussion space for Leaders, but it should not be decision making and therefore reference to a 'Board' should be avoided.
- Several members commented that they felt it was an appropriate time to consider the future role of the joint committee and that they broadly supported the proposals within the report and refocussing the joint committees work to operate where it could add value.
- That the lessons around what was felt to be the failure of previous joint collaborative arrangements, such as the end of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 project, did not appear to have been taken on board and members were concerned mistakes would be repeated.
- That lessons could be learned from successful joint working in other counties with two tier authorities that did not have a joint committee in place, but the counter point was made that a number of other successful 'growth boards' existed.

In response to the points made to that point, Councillor Leffman stressed there was an important distinction between the development and agreement of cross boundary strategy which the new joint committee was proposed to have a role in and actual delivery which would remain the responsibility of the individual councils to deliver. The point around the uncertainty of HM Government's proposals about local government reorganisation in the absence of the White Paper was acknowledged, but it was felt better to begin preparations now in the likelihood that a transition to a unitary form of governance would be announced.

Councillor Leffman agreed that more information was needed on costs.

In the discussion of recommendations to the Future Partnership it was proposed that the remit of the joint committee be restricted to a forum for the discussion of devolution to meet as and when required and that the additional matters set out in bullet points two to four of paragraph nine of the report relating to inclusivity and inequality, sustainability and infrastructure not be progressed through the new joint committee. Upon being put to a vote this was not agreed and after further discussions it was resolved as follows.

RESOLVED: The Scrutiny Panel recommended that in the event the Partnership supports the officer recommendation that plans for the Partnership reset be developed in more detail, the following matters be agreed and/or clarified:

1. That if a joint statutory committee of the Leaders is reconstituted as a successor to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, consideration of an overview and scrutiny function be central to its design and that this be affirmed by the Partnership. The Panel noted that the report already says that a formal O&S is required in the relevant legislation.
2. The Panel recognises the complicated and evolving nature of HM Government's proposals around devolution and potential local government reorganisation and that this makes current future planning difficult. It recommends that there be opportunity for scrutiny of any devolution proposals at an Oxfordshire wide level in addition to scrutiny at individual council level.
3. That in advance of any final decision about the Partnership's successor a full financial breakdown of all costs, covering the current and proposed support arrangements including meeting arrangements may be beneficial.
4. That the Partnership agree and affirm that in seeking to maximise opportunities for investment and funding in Oxfordshire, any successor joint committee to the Partnership should act in accordance with the agreed principles of sustainable growth set out in the [Oxfordshire Strategic Vision](#).
5. That there be clarity around the governance arrangements of any successor to the Partnership in respect of voting arrangements, quorum and safeguards for individual constituent authorities who do not support a proposition adopted by the joint committee.

16. Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal: Update at the end of Quarter 2 2024/2025

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership which provided an update on progress and spend for schemes included as part of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal as of the end of Quarter Two 2024/2025. Valerie Lambrechts, Infrastructure Portfolio Manager, Oxfordshire County Council introduced the report and responded to member questions. It was highlighted that the Housing from Infrastructure overall programme was currently over profiled by £557,000, a reduction of £132,000 from Quarter One.

Ten projects had been completed and updates were provided to the Panel on the progress of various schemes as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Panel was informed that officers were confident that all the available grant funding would be committed by the end of the 2024/2025 financial year and no funding would need to be returned.

The Chair also asked about the use of Housing from Infrastructure monies to forward fund needed infrastructure for specific housing developments in advance of the receipt of developer contributions. This was to facilitate the delivery of the housing and such funds were recovered from developers at a later stage and essentially used again for another project. Valerie indicated that the use of recovered funds could be reference in the next report.

Individual members of the Panel were then provided with updates on the delivery of specific schemes and Councillor Cooke spoke to the urgency of an alternative funding solution for the proposed Milton Heights pedestrian bridge, acknowledging that the scheme was outside of the Housing and Growth Deal.

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

17. Enabling Community Led Housing; approval of Business Case

The Panel considered a report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership which set out a business case for a project to commission Community First Oxfordshire to provide an enabling service to Oxfordshire residents interested in the development of Community Led Housing, (CLH) including self-build housing. Paul Staines, Future Oxfordshire Partnership Programme Manager introduced the report to the Panel. He highlighted that the proposals built on where there was already collaboration between the councils and officers were working together. The additional funding was intended to give CLH an additional boost.

In discussion, members of the Panel strongly supported the approval of the business case. The importance of the establishment of Community Land Trusts within district localities was stressed, particularly as it was felt that individuals and organisations minded to transfer or donating land were likely to respond more positively to CLTs which had local a connection.

Panel members also raised the issue of the management of shared green spaces on developer-built estates and the potential role of CLTs to manage such spaces rather than private companies. It was suggested that often such companies levied high charges with little opportunity for residents to influence the management of the shared space. They suggested that officers should consider whether there was scope to expand the proposed business case to include this type of activity.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be recommended to approve the Community Led Housing business case and use of £38,000 of Housing and Growth Deal Capacity Fund budget.
2. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be requested to ask officers to consider increasing the scope of the business case to help foster community-led trusts/organizations in new (or possibly existing as well) developer-built estates where

there is local interest, to look after e.g. green spaces instead of residents having to pay a management fee to a private company, too often for a poor service for which they have little control.

18. Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan, (NZRMAP) Annual Report

The Panel considered a report and appendices to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership that set out an update on the steps taken to operationalise the actions in the first delivery phase of the Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan agreed by the Partnership in March 2023. Ariane Crampton, Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership and Programme Manager, Oxfordshire County Council introduced the report and responded to Panel member questions.

In discussion, members of the Panel welcomed the report, with the suggestion that it should also be shared with individual council overview and scrutiny committees. In addition, member raised the importance of travel to work distances and road construction on carbon emissions from transport, the role to be played by roof top solar and Scope Three emissions:

RESOLVED: The Panel strongly welcomed the update report and supported the work being undertaken to support the transition to Net Zero as an example of an area where value was added by cross boundary working together.

1. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership suggest to its constituent councils that they individually consider the report as appropriate within their own governance arrangements.
2. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership note the request of the Panel that officers consider the detailed points made in its discussion of the report as appropriate related, but not limited to:
 - a. Transport emissions and the relationship between transport emissions linked to residence and employment locations.
 - b. Consideration of Net Zero implications as part of the capital budgetary approval process for infrastructure.
 - c. Emissions from construction.
 - d. Ability to track 'Scope Three' emissions.
 - e. Advantages and disadvantages of an approach based on consumption vs geographical emissions.

19. Future Oxfordshire Partnership Annual Report 2023/2024

The Panel considered the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Annual report for 2023/2024.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

20. Planning Advisory Group update

The Panel received the notes of the meeting of the Planning Advisory Group held on 13 September 2024.

In discussion, members referred to the consideration by the advisory group of issues related to the planning of primary healthcare infrastructure. A number of members commented that access to local NHS services including GPs was one of the most often raised issue of concern to local residents in surveys and on the doorstep. The issues were complex and the potential solutions and levers to increase facilities for residents were not clear, although it was positive that discussions had now taken place with the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Best West Integrated Car Board, (ICB). Better ways to plan for and deliver health care facilities were needed, but a key issue at national level was the inability of the ICB to own and acquire their own property.

Paul Staines, Future Oxfordshire Partnership Programme Manager informed the meeting that a core objective of the Partnership through the advisory group was to facilitate a through discussion between local authorities and the ICB and it was felt that it was acknowledged by the ICB that an ongoing two-way conversation of the issues involved was needed.

21. Work programme for the Scrutiny Panel

The work programme of the Panel was received, subject to its proposed disbandment by the Partnership.

It was suggested that in consideration of potential future scrutiny arrangements there should be a focus on items that could be debated and that to note items not be discussed in any depth to allow greater time for discussion of the key issues.

22. Dates of next meetings

The Chair thanked officers and members for their attendance and contributions. It was noted that if the proposal to disband the Panel was agreed by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership remaining scheduled meetings would be cancelled.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm