

Joint Scrutiny Committee



Report of Head of Policy and Programmes

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To: Joint Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 7 November 2022

Oxfordshire Food Strategy

Recommendation

- (a) Scrutiny is asked to consider the Oxfordshire Food Strategy (Part One) principles and framework for delivery, attached at appendix one, and provide comments to the relevant Cabinet member for consideration prior to the strategy being presented to both Cabinets.

Purpose of Report

1. To update the Joint Scrutiny Committee on the Oxfordshire Food Strategy drafted by Good Food Oxfordshire, including the principles and framework for delivery.
2. To outline how the Oxfordshire Food Strategy aligns with the Councils' aims and priorities as set out in their Corporate Plans, Climate Action Plans, and any Council motions.
3. To outline the next steps of the Oxfordshire Food Strategy, notably the development of a detailed local action plan with community, voluntary and community sector (VCS) and business partners which will enable the council to drive forward key initiatives based on our sphere of influence and the resources available to us.
4. To provide an overview of the potential uses of the funding allocation proposed by Oxfordshire County Council, to assist with the development and implementation of the food action plan.

Corporate Objectives

5. The Strategy supports many council priorities and aims as set out in their Corporate Plans and Climate Action Plans (see a detailed list at appendix two).
6. On 14 July 2022, South Oxfordshire declared a Cost of Living Emergency and passed a [Motion](#) addressing the food system in the district. On 13 July 2022, Vale of the White Horse passed a [Motion](#) on the Cost of Living Crisis and on 18 May 2022 passed a [Motion](#) addressing Food and Farming in the district. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy is congruent with each of these resolutions. In Vale, the council's commitment to appoint a Food and Farming Champion role in Vale is firmly aligned with one of the ideas for local councils put forward in the Food Strategy to 'appoint food champions at cabinet as conduits for food issues and action'.
7. The adoption of the strategy would help provide a framework for taking forward the resolutions with multi stakeholder partners including VCS organisations, food producers and suppliers across Oxfordshire.
8. The Food Strategy has been written to sit alongside the differing priorities and commitments of the organisations involved, including district councils. To that end, the strategy seeks to be integrated within existing policies and programmes, whether these are organisation or district specific, or county-wide.

Background

9. Covid-19 brought the issues of food insecurity, access to healthy, affordable food and the impact of these on health into sharp focus. Oxfordshire food banks saw a three-four-fold increase in use, with a conservative estimate that around 6,000 people a week required support to access food.¹ While, local community food networks across the district rose to the challenge, working closely and constructively with our Community Hub team, it became evident that there was a requirement for an end-to-end strategy covering all key organisations and stakeholders in the Oxfordshire

¹ GFO Good Food Oxford 'Oxfordshire's Community Food Services: Summary of Research Findings' (May 2020), [Oxfordshire's Community Food Services: Summary of Research Findings \(goodfoodoxford.org\)](#), 6

system. The district and city councils agreed that Oxfordshire County Council would commission Good Food Oxfordshire to develop a food strategy for Oxfordshire.

10. Since the strategy was commissioned, its importance has been highlighted by Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the worsening cost of living crisis which have created additional strain on the food system.
11. It is now estimated that eight to ten per cent of all households in Oxfordshire experience food insecurity². This equates to 20,000-25,000 households and 55,000-69,000 people. It is estimated that six-seven per cent of all households are experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity. This equates to 15,500-18,000 people.³
12. Across the UK, it is estimated that 50 per cent more people are now in fuel poverty and face the choice of heating their homes or eating. Food prices have increased by an average of 5.9 per cent. Staples such as dairy, pasta, eggs and cooking oils have increased at the fastest rate. The largest proportional impact of these increases is on low-income households who are unable to switch away from essential spending. Of course, the food banks at the forefront of this crisis are faced with the same rising costs, greater demand, and increasingly lower supply of staple food items.
13. Poor diets, exacerbated by food insecurity is evident in the growing obesity rates. Ensuring access to healthy food and education around its use is a key intervention to counteract a range of health conditions from Covid-19 to heart disease and type 2 diabetes.
14. The environmental effects of our food system are also a matter of concern as identified in the council's corporate objectives. According to the IPCC, food systems currently account for between 21 and 37 per cent of total greenhouse gases and contribute to biodiversity loss.⁴
15. The need to build resilience into our local food systems to ensure better access to food has never been greater and it is these issues which the Oxfordshire Food Strategy aims to address.

Developing the strategy

16. Oxfordshire County Council commissioned Good Food Oxfordshire in agreement with the city and district councils to develop a food strategy for Oxfordshire. It is seen to be a strategy not just for councils but for the whole food system encompassing community organisations, food producers, businesses, institutions and individuals.
17. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy has been developed using a multi-stakeholder approach, including the Oxfordshire city and district councils, representatives from Oxfordshire community sector groups, local food producers and other major institutions, brought together by Good Food Oxfordshire. It has been created in partnership because it is recognised that to address the challenges of food poverty,

² Data specific to the district is not currently available

³ Good Food Oxfordshire, 'A Food Poverty Action Plan for Oxfordshire' (August 2021), [GFO-Food-Poverty-Report-2021-FINAL-layouted.pdf \(goodfoodoxford.org\)](#) 7. This figure is an estimate based on data from the ONS, Food Foundation and the DWP Household Survey in 2021.

⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate Change and Land' (Jan 2020), [SPM_Updated-Jan20.pdf \(ipcc.ch\)](#), p. 10.⁵ GFO Oxfordshire Food Strategy Appendix page 24

food supply, climate change and public health tipping points we need a whole system approach to maximise the benefits.

18. Good Food Oxfordshire has drawn on research⁵ into food insecurity, the impact of food on health, the environmental impact of the food system and the local food picture to develop the strategy.
19. Public and stakeholder engagement has played an integral role in developing the strategy. Initial engagement including initial consultation with Oxfordshire local authorities took place between August and October 2021. This included one-to-one meetings, round table events and related discussion forums, including the Health Improvement Board and Climate Action Programme Board. A timeline of engagement and research events as well as the papers consulted is published on the Good Food Oxfordshire website (see appendix three). Events included:
 - a. Healthy Weight Community Insights Programme attended by 146 people including over 50 organisations.
 - b. Oxfordshire Schools Food Workshop attended by more than 40 people representing schools, councils, communities and caterers.
 - c. Regular Community Food Network Meetings with over 80 local organisations are part of the Community Food Networks (CFNs). These include foodbanks, community larders and fridges as well as local advice services, councils and other VCS organisations.
20. It is recognised that there is a necessity for much more substantial engagement at a local district level in the development of more detailed local action plans which would form the second part of this work.

The Strategy

21. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy put forward is envisioned as a 'first step towards drawing together the many strands of work that are already happening across the county and seeing them as a coherent whole'.
22. It aims to tackle the challenges of health and wellbeing; climate change and biodiversity; fair incomes and employment; and to facilitate a vibrant and sustainable food system allowing all residents equal opportunity to access healthy food all year long. The strategy (attached as appendix one) seeks to identify priority areas for action, links to existing initiatives and policy and showcases examples of excellence that can be learnt from and built upon.
23. It seeks to address the issue of food insecurity by supporting more locally produced and sustainable food, allowing all residents equal opportunity to access healthy food all year round, through education to minimise food waste or grow their own, and through accessing food banks or community larder schemes. There are longer term ambitions within the strategy to grow Oxfordshire's local food economy through local enterprises, local jobs and local wealth generation.
24. This high-level vision seeks to achieve these aims through the following ambitions:

⁵ GFO Oxfordshire Food Strategy Appendix page 24

- a) Food justice: healthy and sustainable food is affordable and accessible to everyone
- b) Sustainable food economy: local food businesses flourish, with more productions, more outlets, more employment and better standards for workers
- c) Good food movement: more people can enjoy and engage with healthy, sustainable food and 'good food for everyone' is part of our culture
- d) Food for the planet: we waste less food and the food that we do produce, consume and waste has a less negative impact on the planet
- e) Sustainable supply chains: more locally produced, sustainable food is bought and consumed locally, and supply chains are more resilient
- f) Governance and strategy: continue, evaluate and strengthen existing initiatives. Build foundations for new initiatives. Establish enablers to manage and monitor progress.

25. The next stage (referred to in the strategy as Part Two), is where the detail and actions will lie and where the council has the opportunity to lead the development of and have meaningful input into a future local action plans with partners.

Next Steps – Action Plan Development

26. As a next step, should Cabinets agree the strategy, we would be invited to develop an action plan with other key stakeholders across our district, drawing on further consultation and engagement with local communities, farmers, food businesses and town and parish councils. Actions could include:

- communications and marketing
- practical support such as identifying opportunities or providing access to green spaces for community gardens
- provision of local business support to address food waste
- supporting infrastructure, guidance and access to funding for Community Food Services
- exploring locally sourced food options and any other ideas or initiatives we wish to explore.

27. To help facilitate this, Oxfordshire County Council agreed to allocate £250,000 of funding to all district and city councils to deliver actions that will directly impact accessibility to food. The actual amount for South and Vale is expected to be in the region of £30-40,000 per council. The funding will be allocated per District/City Council, using a previously established DWP formula, which is based on population weighted by deprivation as measured by the index of multiple deprivation index. The funding can be used internally by each council or directed towards community groups within each district's area. Full engagement within the development process of the strategy can ensure that the actions proposed are in support of our priorities and the specific needs of our districts.

- 28. The funding on offer cannot be used to resource personnel. However, there is both policy resource within the community hub and resource from Good Food Oxfordshire (funded by Oxfordshire County Council) who will help to form, drive and collate the action plans. This should be sufficient to create a meaningful action plan.
- 29. If agreed, the officer representation on the local steering group from the council will liaise with a working party of officers within the council from relevant internal teams such as Economic Development, Environmental Health, Community Wellbeing, Waste and Property.
- 30. A draft timeline is set out below:

Date:	Action
7 November 2022	Food Strategy considered by Joint South and Vale Scrutiny Committee
1 December 2022	Strategy taken to South Cabinet for endorsement
2 December 2022	Strategy taken to Vale Cabinet for endorsement
December 2022/ January 2023	Development of terms of reference for local action plan groups
February - March 2023	Development of local area action plans
July 2023	Part 2 - Local food strategy action plans to Scrutiny Committee for comment and recommendations to Cabinet. Part 2 – Local food strategy action plans proposal to relevant Cabinet for approval.

Climate and ecological impact implications

- 31. The ambition ‘Food for the planet’ is specifically designed to focus on reducing food waste and reducing the carbon impact that food consumption has in the county
- 32. The ‘sustainable supply chains’ ambition will also seek to encourage the development of local, sustainable supply chains which will support local producers and reduce the carbon impact of food supply.
- 33. Both Councils Climate Action Plans includes an action OP12, to ‘Partner with Good Food Oxfordshire to support their Good Food Strategy for Oxfordshire, ensuring climate considerations are included throughout the strategy’, therefore engagement with the Strategy would meet the spirit of this action and work towards the overall aim becoming carbon neutral district by 2030/2045.

Financial Implications

- 34. Note the proposed grant allocation from Oxfordshire County Council that is outlined in paragraph 27 of this report. Expenditure will be kept within the grant allocation received from Oxfordshire County Council with no additional costs to the council budget. Any further cost implications will be developed in the local food strategy action plan and reported as part of a separate report.

35. It is accepted that, prior to the action plans being developed it is not possible to know whether this figure will cover all actions which impact accessibility to food, and it is not allocated with this expectation. Rather it is a contribution to be borne in mind while plans are being developed alongside any other funds from contributing partners existing budgets or fund-raising campaigns.

Legal Implications

36. There is no legal obligation to adopt the Oxfordshire Food Strategy. However, not supporting the strategy and not participating in its implementation may see the Councils' miss out on funding that could support work to tackle food poverty and other food related issues in the districts.

37. Supporting principles of the Oxfordshire Food Strategy neither imposes nor infers any additional obligations on the council and it is therefore considered that there are no legal implications in adopting the strategy.

Risks

38. Given the councils' commitment to support residents during the cost-of-living crisis and the Climate Emergency declarations, not adopting a strategy which mirrors and is in alignment with these commitments could pose both a reputational risk and questions around the councils' commitment to act.

39. Not supporting the strategy, when it is enacted by others, entails a further possible reputational risk.

40. Not supporting the strategy may also risk the council's being excluded from the benefits of future collaborations including the opportunity to develop the Local Food action plans with local stakeholders.

41. Exclusion from developing the food action plans could also prevent access to funding on offer which could be used to develop and support work in the districts for which there would otherwise not be a budget.

42. There is a risk that trying to create a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy will mean that the different food related challenges across the county are not sufficiently appreciated. This should be addressed in Part 2 as partners seek to develop action plans to address challenges at a local level. However, if the strategy is not endorsed the opportunity to work with community partners and influence this work could be lost.

Other Implications

43. There are not considered to be any other implications beyond those set out above.

Conclusion

44. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy is a first step in the development and facilitation of work around Sustainable Food and the Cost-of-Living emergency in both districts which meets many corporate and climate objectives and seeks to help residents struggling to access food.

45. The strategy confers no obligations on the councils, but it does offer the opportunity to develop work which is line with many of the councils' priorities.
46. Joint Scrutiny Committee is therefore asked for comments on these proposals for Cabinet's to consider before endorsing the strategy.

Background Papers

Appendix 1: The Oxfordshire Food Strategy - 2022

Appendix 2 – Corporate Plan and Climate Action Plan objectives

Appendix 3: Oxfordshire Food Strategy Appendices