

Cabinet Report



Report of Head of Policy and Programmes

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To: CABINET

Date: 2 December 2022

Oxfordshire Food Strategy

Recommendations

- (a) That Cabinet endorses the Oxfordshire Food Strategy (Part One) principles and framework for delivery, attached at appendix one.
- (b) That Cabinet asks officers to work with relevant partners to develop a detailed local food strategy action plan (Part Two).

Purpose of Report

1. To update Cabinet on the Oxfordshire Food Strategy drafted by Good Food Oxfordshire, including the principles and framework for delivery, and consider it for endorsement.
2. To outline how the Oxfordshire Food Strategy aligns with the Council's aims and priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan, Climate Action Plan and the Council's motions on sustainable food and farming and on the cost-of-living, of 18 May 2022.
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 of the council's priorities and aims as set out in both the Corporate Plan and Climate Action Plan. The key ones are listed in the attached appendix two.
6. On 13 July 2022, the Council 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 and with the commitment which came out of the latter to appoint a Food and Farming Champion role in Vale. Its adoption would help provide a framework for taking forward the resolutions with multi stakeholder partners including VCS organisations, food producers and suppliers across Oxfordshire.
7. 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

8. 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 system. The district and city councils agreed that Oxfordshire County Council would commission Good Food Oxfordshire to develop a food strategy for Oxfordshire.
9. Since the strategy was commissioned, its importance has been highlighted by the cost-of-living crisis, Brexit and the war in Ukraine which have created additional strain on the food system.
10. At the time of writing the strategy it was estimated that eight to ten per cent of all households in Oxfordshire experience food insecurity². This equated to 20,000-25,000 households and 55,000-69,000 people. It is estimated that six to seven per cent of all households were experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity. This equates to 15,500-18,000 people.³ Given the current cost of living crisis it is

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 \(goodfoodoxford.org\)](https://www.goodfoodoxford.org)

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 \(goodfoodoxford.org\)](https://www.goodfoodoxford.org) 7. This figure is an estimate based on data from the ONS, Food Foundation and the DWP Household Survey in 2021.

reasonable to assume that this picture will have worsened in the intervening months.

11. Across the UK, it is estimated that fifty per cent more people are now in fuel poverty with some studies estimating this figure could be as high as seventy-five per cent by January 2023. The latest ONS figures state that food prices have increased by up to sixty-five per cent in the last year with staples such as dairy, pasta, eggs and cooking oils increasing 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 lower supply of staple food items.
12. 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.
13. 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
14. 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

15. 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.
16. 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 aforementioned challenges of food poverty, food supply, climate change and public health tipping points we need a whole system approach to maximise the benefits.
17. 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.
18. 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

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

⁵ GFO Oxfordshire Food Strategy Appendix page 24

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 and 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.
19. 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

20. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy put forward to Cabinet 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'.
21. 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.
22. 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.
23. This high-level vision seeks to achieve these aims through the following ambitions:
- 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.
24. 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 for meaningful input into a future local action plan with partners.

Next Steps – Action Plan Development

25. As a next step, we are 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.
26. 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 Vale of the White Horse is expected to be in the region of £40,000. 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 district.
27. 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.
28. 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.
29. A draft timeline is set out below:

| Date: | Action |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 7 November 2022 | Food Strategy taken to 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 group |
| February - March 2023 | Development of local area action plan |
| July 2023 | Part 2 - Local food strategy action plan to Scrutiny Committee for comment and recommendations to Cabinet. Part 2 – Local food strategy action plan proposal to Cabinet for approval. |

Options

30. 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 Council miss out on funding that could support work to tackle food poverty and other food related issues in the district.

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. The council's own Climate Action Plan includes the 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.

Equalities and Diversity implications

34. The strategy has a specific focus on providing support to people living in food poverty. It is noted that we have seen a significant increase in people requiring support to access food, including the use of food banks.
35. People with protected characteristics are more likely to experience food poverty and therefore the creation of the strategy will have a positive impact.
36. The strategy also seeks to promote fair wages for people working in the food economy and will therefore seek to positively impact on those living in areas of social deprivation.

Financial Implications

37. Note the proposed grant allocation from Oxfordshire County Council that is outlined in paragraph 26 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.
38. 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.
39. Scrutiny expressed concern around the sufficiency of the grant allocation and requested that this concern be noted. Officers anticipate that the local action plan will be about creating synergies and connections between the work already taking place in our communities and the facilitation of a more strategic, coordinated, and efficient approach be taken across the network rather than funding specific issues such as food banks. The steering group will be aware of the budget and will make the best use of the budget available when creating the action plan. Should proposed actions be identified within the draft action plan that require additional funding, funding options will be explored, and any relevant budget approval processes will apply.
40. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For Vale, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2022 showed that the council was able to set a balanced budget for 2022/23, but that there is expected to be a budget gap in future years.
41. This funding gap is predicted to increase to over £3 million by 2026/27. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisant of the need to address this funding gap in future years.

Legal Implications

42. 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

43. Given the council's commitment to support residents during the cost of living crisis, its Climate Emergency declaration and its Food and Farming motion of the 18 May 2022, not adopting a strategy which mirrors and is in alignment with these commitments could pose both a reputational risk and questions around the council's commitment to taking action.

44. Not supporting the strategy, when it is enacted by others, entails a further possible reputational risk.
45. Not supporting the strategy may also risk the council being excluded from the benefits of future collaborations including the opportunity to develop the Local Food action plans with local stakeholders.
46. 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 district for which there would otherwise not be a budget.
47. 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

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

Conclusion

49. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy is a first step in the development and facilitation of work around Sustainable Food (Food and Farming) which meets many corporate and climate objectives and seeks to help residents struggling to access food.
50. The strategy confers no obligations on the council, but it does offer the opportunity to develop work which is line with many of the council's priorities. Officers therefore recommend that Cabinet endorses the Oxfordshire Food Strategy.
51. If Cabinet supports the officer recommendation, then the development of a local food strategy action plan will commence and be further considered by cabinet as part of a further report to include an update on costs and funding.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The Oxfordshire Food Strategy

Appendix 2: Corporate Plan and Climate Action Plan objectives

Appendix 3: Oxfordshire Food Strategy Appendices

Appendix 4: Sustainable Food and Farming Motion 18 May 2022