

Cabinet Report



Report of Deputy Chief Executive - Place

Author: Suzanne Malcolm

Telephone: 07717 151153

E-mail: Suzanne.malcolm@southandvale.gov.uk

Wards affected: All

Vale Cabinet member responsible: Councillor Bethia Thomas

Tel: 07906 821680

To: CABINET

Date: 28 June 2024

Review of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership

Recommendation(s)

(a) For Cabinet to consider the future remit of Future Oxfordshire Partnership, a statutory joint committee, and to seek engagement from all councillors on that remit in order to assist the Leader in representing the Council's views

(b) To note the Chief Executive's email to DHLUC officials (sent at the request of the Leader of the Council and agreed by the Leader) setting out the Council's request and headline position around aspects of devolution, which is likely to be a priority for any new government.

Implications (further detail within the report)	Financial	Legal	Climate and Ecological	Equality and diversity
	Yes	No	No	No
Signing off officer	Simon Hewings			

Purpose of report

1. To seek cabinet members' views on the future of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP), a statutory joint committee, and set out how to seek engagement from the wider members on that future.

Corporate objectives

2. This report supports the corporate objective of "openness and accountability".

Background

3. Noting that the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal has almost completed and the responsibility for the Growth Deal funding has now passed to Oxfordshire County Council. (OCC), the Leaders of all the Oxfordshire councils have collectively agreed that there is a need for a review of FOP.
4. There is now an important opportunity for Vale of White Horse District Council to put forward its thoughts on the role of FOP and what role and responsibilities it has going forward.
5. The terms of reference for this statutory joint committee can be found [here](#).
6. The current FOP structure comprises of:
 - A main partnership board, a joint committee of Oxfordshire's six councils (voting membership) alongside co-opted associate members from OxLEP, Environment Agency, University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University and Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board.
 - Four advisory groups made up of a wider group of the relevant portfolio holders, each chaired by a Leader, covering: infrastructure, housing, the environment and planning.
 - A FOP Scrutiny panel (a non-statutory panel made up of three members from each authority), which is empowered to review and scrutinise plans, proposals and decisions to be taken and actions taken in connection with the discharge of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership's, functions and the delivery of the agreed Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal.
 - An Executive Officers' Group (EOG) which is the officer advisory group bringing together Environment and Place Directors and other key stakeholder partners and acts as the executive for the board.
 - An officer support team providing secretariat, communications support and some programme management capacity to FOP as well as the Local Nature Partnership, the Oxford Inclusive Economy Partnership and the Enhanced Bus Partnership.
7. In 2021 FOP developed "The Oxfordshire Strategic Vision" which set out nine guiding principles agreeing the overarching approach to long-term sustainable development in Oxfordshire. This was formally approved by Cabinet on 9 April 2021.

Options

8. Clearly there is a need for FOP to evolve and it is important for the council to ensure any activity FOP undertakes remains relevant and of value to the work of the council, assisting the delivery of the council's corporate objectives and ensuring value for money for its residents.
9. There are clearly some areas where there are advantages to working in partnership, although this does not necessarily require a statutory committee to achieve, on a countywide basis where there are areas of commonality and where these areas do not impinge on the responsibilities of individual councils.
10. Some potential options members could consider are:
 - a new slimmed down structure of FOP, focussed on cooperating on a small number of agreed key issues, where joint working delivers valuable output to all councils and the joint committee has a clearly defined remit, and only on matters individual councils choose to grant it.
 - to become a more open and transparent vehicle, with democratically elected members setting the remit with a clear focus on elected representatives, namely, the leaders, to represent the democratic views of the councils, supported by representatives from business, health and education reporting formally to the joint committee where necessary.
 - reducing the number of sub-groups, if any at all are required, with all reports coming straight to the formal joint committee, without the need for them to go through the advisory groups first to allow open and transparent discussion.
 - balanced representation of economic, environmental and social interests (not just economic) and only when meaningful and productive.
 - reducing the requirement for council officers to support a large number of meetings and groups. Members will be aware that, in addition to the ongoing £83,000 budgeted contribution towards the administration of FOP, a further £100,000 of ongoing growth was added to the 2024/25 budget to cover the anticipated additional staff resource required to support FOP related activities. Officers were asked to seek to reduce this to a minimum but have been unable to do so. In fact, several current proposals could increase the financial commitment required of the council in terms of officer time and direct contributions beyond this additional budgetary envelope.
 - seek to reduce replication and assess if a better functioning joint committee could reduce the number of additional partnerships, if appropriate.
 - ensure sound governance, recognising that no papers should be issued without the agreement of all statutory partners, as the joint committee is a committee of all.

Issues for consideration

11. Whilst Oxfordshire has a shared administrative geography and many similarities, it is not consistently equal. The spatial and economic geography of the Vale of White

Horse is fundamentally different from that in the Oxford city area and to the north of the county.

12. Whilst some initiatives such as development of the Vision have been successful, the mutual agreement of Oxfordshire councils to stop work on OxPlan 2050, is a clear example of the lack of cohesion across Oxfordshire in terms of housing market and economy. The fact that all councils are now progressing their own local plans individually demonstrates the fact that spatial planning at a county level is not necessary or desirable.
13. Whatever the outcome of the General Election on 4 July 2024, it will be clear to all council members that some form of local government reform is on the horizon. Therefore, it is important for the council to be clear on its views of possible reform to ensure that it proactively positions itself in the best possible position to achieve a successful outcome, for example, of any devolution deal that involves the district.
14. In August 2022, the council confirmed it would not to be part of the Pan Regional Partnership (PRP). Officers are aware that government officials are engaging with other parts of Oxfordshire via the PRP in relation to possible future devolution models across the PRP (though formally, we remain part of the South-East region).
15. At the Leader's request, the Chief Executive has written to DHLUC to express their concern that any government contact on devolution in Oxfordshire, that would affect Vale of White Horse, needs to come direct to Vale of White Horse District Council rather than via the PRP (to which Vale is not part). As part of this correspondence, the Chief Executive has set out the overall context of the council's position taken in 2019 regarding preference for smaller units of administrative geography (in the region of 300,000), that can demonstrate the ability to be more responsive to local need and yet still be financially efficient.

Next Steps

16. The purpose of this paper is to ensure that this council has a proper opportunity to explore with its members the options around the future vision for FOP.
17. In order to robustly seek the views of members it is proposed to share this paper with both the Joint Audit and Governance Committee and Scrutiny Committee to ensure that as many members have the opportunity to input to this review. This will enable the Leader to fully reflect the views of this council at the Leader based discussions around which are proposed for July and at the formal FOP meeting on 30 July 2024.
18. It is therefore proposed, in the interim, that the Leader writes to the Leader of the Oxford City Council (the current chair) and the Leader of OCC (the chair designate for the coming administrative year) to set out that it is important for each council in Oxfordshire to be given the time to ensure that they are formally able to consider any proposal for the future of FOP, prior to any consideration by FOP itself.
19. Any changes that are proposed to how FOP operates, or its Terms of Reference will require Cabinet approval.

Financial Implications

20. As outlined above the council has budgeted to make an annual £83,000 contribution towards the administration of FOP. In addition, the council budgeted to pay a further £100,000 annually from 2024/25 onwards to cover the anticipated additional staff resource required to support FOP related activities. Should the costs of supporting FOP increase then this would represent non-inflationary growth in future years which, as outlined in the 2024/25 budget setting report, would likely need to be managed through savings and efficiencies, or revisions to service priorities.

Legal Implications

21. There are no specific legal implications at this time.

Conclusion

22. This is an important opportunity for the council to determine the value of FOP to the council and its residents and to ensure that any future remit of FOP meets the council's vision for that statutory joint committee.