

To: Future Oxfordshire Partnership
Title of Report: Partnership Reset
Date: 26 November 2024
Report of: Andrew Down, FOP Director
Status: Open

Executive Summary and Purpose:

This report summarises recent discussions about the future purpose and scope of partnership working, and presents an interim position for endorsement.

How this report contributes to the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision Outcomes:

The proposed priority work areas are closely aligned to the nine outcomes set out in the Strategic Vision, particularly around the environment, net zero aspirations, inclusive economy, community and connectivity.

Recommendations:

That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership endorses the proposed powers, purposes, priorities and steps set out in this report, and requests officers to develop the plans in more detail along with revised terms of reference.

Introduction

1. A number of factors have come together to cause members of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) to take stock and consider a significant reset. This report sets out the main considerations and proposes an initial response.
2. A new national government is in office. It has invited discussions about devolution but without as yet clearly specifying what that might mean in an Oxfordshire context. Government has indicated their intention is for universal coverage of Mayoral Combined Authorities at sub regional (larger than county) level. We can expect to learn more when an English Devolution White Paper is published (expected before the end of the year); meanwhile the six council leaders have responded to the government's invitation by expressing interest in further conversation.
3. Reforms are proposed to the National Planning Policy Framework and in connection with national economic planning and industrial strategy. The new government has mooted the possibility of local government reorganisation, but once again with no specific information available at this stage. It is clear that Oxfordshire's local authorities need to be prepared and organised to engage with

the devolution agenda (with both national government and neighbouring areas) and a potential requirement for a suite of strategic level policy developments.

4. Away from the national stage, the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal has provided a focal point for much of the FOP work programme in recent years, and is now coming to an end. Governance structures established in connection with the Housing and Growth Deal are no longer required.
5. The points presented in this report therefore represent thinking for the immediate period, and may need to be revisited as more clarity emerges.

Proposed purpose and priorities

6. It is worth noting that the existing FOP terms of reference state that the partnership will:
 - Coordinate local efforts to manage economic, housing and infrastructure development in a way that is inclusive and maximises local social and environmental benefits;
 - Support the development of local planning policy that meets the UK Government's stated aim of net zero carbon by 2050, and contributes towards biodiversity gain whilst embracing the changes needed for a low carbon world; and,
 - Seek to secure funding in the pursuit of these aims and oversee the delivery of related work programmes delegated to it by the Joint Committee's constituent local authority members.
7. Partners have all adopted the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire which can be found at <https://www.futureoxfordshirepartnership.org/a-vision-for-oxfordshire>. The following three overarching purposes are now proposed for the partnership:
 - To be a forum for the local authorities to work collectively to deliver the Oxfordshire Strategic vision
 - To be a collective Oxfordshire voice for engaging with government on their devolution and growth agenda to promote successful, inclusive and sustainable economy
 - To work collectively on thematic priorities to address the strategic challenges and maximise opportunities for investment and funding in Oxfordshire.
8. It is clear that we face a number of strategic challenges which are best approached through collective conversations as well as individual actions at the appropriate authority level. The themes of strategic spatial planning, sustainable economic growth and provision of infrastructure, for example, cannot be effectively addressed by isolated actions alone.

9. It is recognised that partnership working should be focussed on areas where there is value added by collaboration, and that duplication should be avoided. With those points in mind the following priority areas for partnership working are proposed.
- Devolution: developing our proposals for devolved powers which would assist us to achieve sustainable economic growth in line with the Oxfordshire vision
 - Inclusivity and inequality: building a stronger, more productive and inclusive economy, and tackling inequality in all its forms:
 - Healthy place shaping and strong communities
 - Inclusive economy, skills & employability
 - Sustainability: responding to the climate crisis and enhancing the natural environment:
 - Bio-diversity and nature recovery
 - Net-zero transition
 - Climate adaptation
 - Infrastructure: place shaping and collaboration at the strategic level:
 - Connectivity and mobility
 - Energy, water, waste and AI
 - Possible joint initiatives for delivering affordable/social housing and a sustainable housing mix

A new approach

10. Bearing in mind that the external picture is still changing, the following approach is proposed for resetting the partnership.

Re-establish the partnership's identity as a formal joint committee

11. The FOP is already constituted as a joint committee of the six council leaders, but in practice, since the earlier stages of the housing and growth deal, it has seldom taken decisions and has no functions delegated to it by the respective councils. It is proposed that:
- The terms of reference should be updated so that the core of the partnership is a joint committee of the six council leaders (or their named substitutes). Functions should be delegated to the committee sufficient to provide accountability for the agreed purposes, priorities and work programme and this will need to be flexible, for example as any opportunities to take on devolved powers might become available.
 - The councils maintain a clear commitment to genuine and constructive engagement with other sectors and agencies. This will include having clear links to effective delivery focussed partnerships, for example, the Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership and the Local Nature Partnership.

- The rich input into the current FOP's activity from non-local authority members of the board is of great value and consideration will need to be given on how this influence is maintained from key sectors, without creating confusion with decision making within formal local authority structures. In parallel, the County Council is developing new advisory proposals to support its economic planning remit following the transfer of the Local Enterprise Partnership functions into its accountability. In line with government guidance, these are likely to include a new Economic Advisory Partnership to ensure that focussed, senior level representation from across sectors (for example Higher and Further Education, business sectors, the voluntary and community sector, health, the district councils and the wider public sector) has a significant voice in strategic decision making. In addition, it is recognised that alignment with economic development and plan making functions of the district councils will be critical to developing and delivering economic strategies and also require engagement with Stakeholders. In the establishment of this partnership body there is an opportunity to ensure that it supports both collective economic strategy functions and the broader functions of the revised FOP.
- In addition, an engagement strategy will be required to include a broader based forum. Proposals have included a regular 'standing conference' style session to maintain a clear forum for joint working and broader engagement, including political engagement.
- That a new name is agreed to clarify the role of the board. The "Oxfordshire Leaders' Board" is proposed to reflect accurately the role of the committee.

Draw a line under the 2018 Oxfordshire housing and growth deal

12. The housing and growth deal has – rightly - been a major focus for the FOP in recent years, but it is now largely at an end and there is no longer any need to include specific structures and governance which were established for its delivery. It is therefore proposed that:
- Standing FOP Advisory Groups will be disbanded and replaced as required with 'task and finish' groups, set specific objectives and timescales by the FOP joint committee to take over any ongoing / new activity. Membership of the task and finish groups is not predetermined and should be established on a case by case basis as appropriate to the task.
 - The FOP Scrutiny Panel has served a very effective purpose in scrutinising and occasionally challenging decisions made in connection with the Housing and Growth Deal. FOP members have been pleased to receive and act upon feedback from the panel. However, this requirement has now come to an end and it is proposed that the Scrutiny Panel in its current form should be disbanded.

Make ready for possible devolution of powers

13. The six councils have collectively responded with an expression of interest in reply to the invitation from MHCLG regarding devolution deals. At this time it is unclear what such a deal might involve in the way of powers, funding, structures and geography, and it is therefore impossible to make very specific plans.
14. However, there is a reasonable expectation that national government will wish to engage with a unified voice for Oxfordshire and it is important that Oxfordshire signals its preparedness. Formal devolution engagement is currently directed through County Council in two tier areas but requires engagement with district councils. In Oxfordshire, the County, City and District councils have agreed to work together to collectively consider options and proposals for devolution as is demonstrated by the Expression of Interest being signed by all 6 Council Leaders. The joint committee structure has the potential to provide a suitable forum and to build on our successful history of collaboration.
15. As government expectations become clearer and frameworks are published it will be necessary to consider the potential benefits and risks of any devolution deal. It may then be necessary to further refine the scope and governance of the partnership.
16. The FOP already includes within its terms of reference collaboration on development of local planning policy. This will need to continue, even if the future geographic basis is wider than Oxfordshire.

Strong delivery of agreed work programme

17. Other partnerships in the county make a contribution to the delivery of the priorities set out at paragraph 4. The FOP should work with these groups and duplication should be avoided. Specific examples include:
 - The Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership has work streams focused on improving inclusivity and reducing inequality. These are also linked to the building blocks of the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
 - The Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership has a particular focus on nature recovery, biodiversity and promoting wider access to nature.
18. There will be a new programme of work associated with the purposes and priorities identified above. Furthermore, there is an existing programme of work which has been funded by the capacity funding in the housing and growth deal, with projects under way including:
 - Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS)
 - Local Area Energy Planning
 - Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan – subject of a separate progress report

- Development of a social value brokerage scheme
19. The first three projects listed above could potentially fall within the remit of a task and finish group focussed on climate change and infrastructure, while the fourth will be pursued through the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership.
 20. Additionally, officers are working on business cases to collaborate on other projects including:
 - Community led housing – subject of a separate report to this meeting
 - Climate adaptation route map - report expected in January 2025
 - Circular economy
 21. There is also some strong collaboration emerging with colleagues in the health sector, aiming to improve the planning of health infrastructure such as GP surgeries. This could potentially be pursued this through existing planning partnerships rather than bringing it directly into the FOP.
 22. With existing projects already in place, and others likely to be identified as set out in the priorities listed above, it is essential to have a strong focus on effective delivery. The Executive Officer Group could perform this function by taking a stronger role with closer involvement of the council chief executives.
 23. Effective delivery of a work programme is dependent upon having the appropriate resources in place. This could mean employing people in a central shared team, or using employees in partner councils, or a mixture of the two approaches. If the proposed resetting of the FOP is agreed, officers will consider resourcing matters and bring forward a further report.

Proposed joint committee powers

24. In order to promote delivery in key areas and build confidence in joint-decision making approach and structures, a limited but strategic list of powers should be considered at the outset for the revised joint committee. Related to the strategic purposes and to the existing workplan, these could include:
 - Forum for coordination of functions and collective working on matters relating to devolution, economic strategy, sub-regional spatial planning and growth plans
 - The agreement of a strategic infrastructure strategy
 - The agreement of Local Area Energy Plans
 - Oversight of the Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan and associated partnership

Financial Implications

25. Support is currently provided for three countywide partnerships by a shared team delivering communications and secretariat support and by a dedicated manager for each of the three supported partnerships:
- Future Oxfordshire Partnership
 - Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership
 - Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership
26. Each of the six councils makes an annual contribution of £100,000 which together makes £600,000 covering all the staffing and support costs. The FOP share is approximately a third of this budget, that is £200,000 across the six partners or around £33,000 each.
27. At this stage officers anticipate that the proposed changes can be achieved within these existing budgets, and further work will be done on resourcing as set out above. There are therefore no financial implications immediately arising from the approach proposed above.

Legal Implications

28. To reflect the changes set out in the report some changes are required to the FOP terms of reference and memorandum of understanding between partners. This will require input from each council's Monitoring Officer and subsequent submission to each council for formal approval.
29. Any revised terms of reference which may include a requirement for a more formal overview and scrutiny function.

Conclusion

30. The drivers for change are summarised in the above draft purposes, priorities and approach for the redevelopment of the FOP. Members are asked to endorse the proposals for follow-up action by officers who will prepare revised terms of reference and will analyse the new resourcing requirements. In order to move swiftly in preparation for likely devolution discussions, officers will prepare proposed Terms of Reference for agreement through local arrangements during the early part of 2025.

Report Author:	<i>Andrew Down, FOP Director</i>
Contact information:	<i>andrew.down@oxfordshire.gov.uk</i>