

Public speakers

26 November 2024

1. Ian Green on behalf Oxford Civic Society

QUESTIONS TO THE PARTNERSHIP – FROM IAN GREEN, CHAIR OF OXFORD CIVIC SOCIETY

My three questions refer to the proposed Future Oxfordshire Partnership re-set.

1. Is the proposed re-set premature?

The report to FOP proposes endorsement of the proposed re-set and requests development of more detail and revised terms of reference. We strongly suggest that this re-set is premature and, as proposed, flawed.

- There are currently many strategic planning (i.e., inter-authority planning) unknowns – although we can be sure that more strategic planning of various kinds will be needed. So why not keep the FOP as it is whilst we find out in more detail what is needed.
- The report to FOP is flawed – it proposes decision making powers but eliminates scrutiny. This cannot be right.

2. Is the FOP, as currently set up, not ideally suited to address the implications of the imminent Planning and Infrastructure Bill and Devolution White Paper?

- Amongst other things, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will introduce strategic planning (inter-authority planning) and strengthened Duty to Cooperate arrangements: a boon to us in Oxfordshire. This kind of planning is essential if we are to plan Oxfordshire's strategic infrastructure for the longer term (beyond Local Plan time horizons). The FOP as currently set up is ideal especially if we can assume that lessons will be learnt from the very unfortunate failure of the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.
- The Devolution White Paper may ask us to consider a county-wide unitary authority arrangement and there may be alternative unitary arrangements that can be considered. The future of the District and City Councils will also need to be discussed. The FOP as currently set up is ideally placed to lead the devolution discussions.

3. Especially bearing in mind the anticipated challenges of the Bill and White Paper should the FOP, in whatever form, be better oriented to public debate.

- Current arrangements for public discussion of strategic issues being considered by FOP are not adequate. FOP's county-wide view and its recommendations for decision by Districts, City and County Councils merits public discussion (and the expression of interest in devolution sent to national government should be public). Indeed, devolution is very much a subject for very wide discussion. Probably, at the end of the day, referenda?

Final comment

We suggest that the recommendation to FOP is not agreed.

2. Councillor Katherine Foxhall, Co-Chair of Joint Scrutiny (South and Vale District Councils)

Dear FOP members,

I address you first in my capacity as co-chair of South and Vale Joint Scrutiny which met to discuss the FOP Reset on Monday 18 November. Secondly, I add my personal thoughts as an elected Vale District councillor.

As Co-Chair of South and Vale Joint Scrutiny

At our Joint Scrutiny meeting we made formal recommendations to our councils' leaders which I expand on slightly here for this group's benefit. I believe these to be a fair representation of our committee's discussions:

1. We advised Leaders to limit the Terms of Reference (TOR) to where the FOP adds value and to avoid duplication. Devolution, Local Area Energy Plans (LAEP), PAZCO, and the use of task and finish groups for other areas were suggested as areas where the FOP can add value.
2. The Oxfordshire Strategic Vision must be front and centre as the democratic basis of any future iteration of FOP. Thematic Priorities must derive from delivery of aims of this Vision;
3. There must be more clarity on accountability, transparency and scrutiny. I note that FOP Scrutiny members are also worried about the lack of reference to scrutiny in this reset paper, particularly if FOP is to have some powers delegated to it. Any powers must have equally weighted scrutiny.
4. Leaders of Councils should be in charge of the FOP work programme and ensure real results, delivery of priorities and added value.
5. South and Vale Joint Scrutiny are very concerned about majority voting remaining in the Terms of Reference, rather than consensus.
6. If less work is being carried out by FOP, there should be less cost to member councils of the FOP.

As a District Councillor

Having had a chance to reflect further on these proposals, I would like the Leaders to justify very clearly what they believe FOP is for. It cannot simply be a basket to hold a shopping list of possibilities until we know what form devolution will take.

Any decisions that this group make must be democratic, transparent and accountable. Otherwise, I am concerned that this reset will have all the appearance of a substantial amount of resource being funnelled in the service of six leaders' talking shop without any real attempt to interrogate how and if the resourcing is necessary or better used elsewhere. I appreciate that the detail of resourcing has implications that should not be a matter for our speculation, but I would ask whether a proportion of each council's allocated resource to FOP could be re-directed to strengthen scrutiny capacity specific to this body within each of the councils.

3. Councillor Sarah James, Vale of White Horse District Council

Cllr Sarah James, Vale of White Horse District Council

I am unable to attend the meeting. Please can the Chair or the Democratic Services Officer read this address out at the meeting.

I have listened to the deliberations of South and Vale's Joint Scrutiny Committee and of the FOP Scrutiny Panel as they have reviewed the contents of the FOP Partnership Reset paper that is before you today. My overall impression is of confusion and contradiction about the nature and powers of the current FOP, never mind the proposed reset.

Speaking to FOP Scrutiny Panel, Cllr Leffman said of the current arrangements that FOP does not take decisions and there is no intention to change that. Cllr Thomas said to South and Vale's Joint Scrutiny committee that FOP has always been a decision-making body, but one that has been careful not to take too many decisions. Those statements may not be entirely contradictory, but they certainly do not provide clarity and transparency.

A key concern for me is that FOP's purpose, its areas of influence and responsibility, and its powers are very poorly defined. The FOP scrutiny panel seems to have struggled to establish a clear and effective role. The Advisory Groups have been utterly inscrutable.

This matters because FOP costs the councils money, directly and indirectly, and partnership working is key to many of our priorities. We need to be able to see what works well, what is value for money, what is a support to councils' work for residents, and what is duplication, distraction or even a hindrance. So, a reset is not unwelcome.

The discussions at the scrutiny panel and committee that I saw did not fill me with confidence that this is a move towards a more transparent and accountable way of partnership working.

I request that in the Leaders' discussion on this item today there is room for an open and frank discussion that will lay bare the expectations and aims of all partners, so that the rest of us can understand what is going on.