

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 21 October 2025

Draft Strategic Plan 2025-28 Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and include those responses as part of any report provided to Council when it is asked to adopt the Strategic Plan
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations. However, in view of the constitutional requirement that the Cabinet publish its response as part of the Council papers, it is advised that the Cabinet agree its response at its meeting on 21 October 2025.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the draft Strategic Plan 2025-28 at its meeting on 12 September 2025.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of

Public Affairs and Policy Partnerships, and Carole Stow, Engagement and Consultation Manager for attending the meeting and responding to questions.

SUMMARY

5. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation introduced the draft strategic plan as a replacement for the previous, more complex version, explaining that the new plan aimed to simplify objectives, better align council actions with strategic goals, and improve communication with the public. The Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships added that the plan focused on three core themes: Greener, Fairer, and Healthier, with clear headline projects shaped by public feedback. It would be accompanied by an outcomes framework that included the new national measures being developed as part of the Local Government Outcomes Framework.
6. In response to the introduction, the Committee began its questioning. Topics explored by the Committee included: aspects of nomenclature, monitoring, the process of engagement and consultation, the achievability of net zero ambitions, and queries over why certain projects were not included within the draft plan.
7. The Committee makes 11 recommendations, which cluster around the 'greener' and 'fairer' aspects of the proposed plan. These seek to highlight a number of activities which the Committee considers should form part of the Council's core mission, or to request points of clarification where necessary. The Committee also makes a number of general recommendations.
8. In addition to the recommendations, discussion of the Strategic Plan inevitably raises issues which the Committee wishes to feed back, but are not directly linked to the Strategic Plan itself. These are passed on to the Cabinet by way of observations, to which the Cabinet is not under a duty to respond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Greener

9. Ostensibly, there is a difference in priorities between the Council, as expressed in the draft Strategic Plan, and residents. The draft plan outlines the Council's wish to make Oxfordshire greener by 'reducing traffic congestion and investing in public transport, cycling and walking; protecting our natural environment; and helping Oxfordshire respond and adapt to a changing climate.' The summary report on the public consultation on the other hand states that being greener is 'not top of mind for residents given perceptions of more pressing issues and cost of living.'
10. Looking more deeply, however, this disconnect is far less significant than might initially appear. Many of the priorities identified by residents – such as road quality, access to public transport, and safety – are all clear outcomes of policies seeking to deliver a greener Oxfordshire. Improved road quality encourages

cycling, a fuller and more reliable public transport network reduces congestion, and the implementation of 20mph speed limits seeks to improve the safety of pedestrians, particularly vulnerable ones such as children and the elderly. This disconnect, insofar as it does exist, appears to be one of presentation, with the Council describing higher-level outcomes and residents seeking more tangible outputs. The Committee recommends that to achieve greater public buy-in for the Council's green agenda that it draws out more clearly the tangible outputs it expects to achieve through its green policies, particularly those which relate to stated resident priorities.

Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet more clearly draws out the links between its green agenda and local resident concerns, using clearer language and relatable examples.

11. In defining what the Council means by 'greener' the draft Strategic Plan states that 'We want our communities to enjoy clean air, access to green space, and safe and sustainable ways to move around. This means... protecting our environment'. As part of its plans to deliver a fairer Oxfordshire, the draft plan says that the Council will work 'with health partners, businesses, voluntary and community sector organisations and the city and district councils to tackle the root causes of health inequalities, including housing, education and employment.'
12. A tension exists between two aspects of these ambitions: the wish to protect the environment and access to green space, whilst also building housing. Although brownfield development does occur, it is typically more difficult and expensive than greenfield development, meaning that developers have a commercial incentive to choose the latter if it is available. In Oxford, where housing affordability is arguably most acute, large scale developments such as Oxford North, South Oxford Science Village and Barton Park, have all led to the loss of green spaces.
13. The Committee does not necessarily disagree with the cost-benefit of these developments and recognises that there will inevitably be trade-offs between its ambitions over housing and protecting green spaces. It recommends that the Council is more open and transparent about the criteria it will use to balance these two important but competing ambitions.

Recommendation 2: That the Cabinet clarifies how it wishes to balance its competing desires to protect green spaces whilst also providing housing

14. The Committee queries two statements made in the draft Strategic Plan in relation to net zero. According to the draft plan, the Council has cut its carbon emissions by over a third since 2008. It also states that it is the Council's ambition 'to be net zero in our council operations by 2030'. In light of the fact that it took the Council 17 years to reduce its emissions by a third, reducing it by a further two thirds over five years requires an acceleration in reductions almost seven times the rate delivered to date. The Committee appreciates

that, for example, the Council's fleet is being decarbonised, and the sale of County Hall will help reduce its carbon emissions significantly. However, before members can be expected to endorse these ambitions they must be assured that the impressive acceleration of carbon reduction is viable. It is asked, therefore, that members of the Council are provided with further details to illustrate how this ambition is planned to be achieved.

Recommendation 3: That Council members are provided with quantitative data and a plan to illustrate the deliverability of the Council's net zero ambitions when they are asked to adopt the draft Strategic Plan

15. Related to the Council's plans for decarbonisation in its own activity by 2030 and for the county as a whole by 2050, the Committee suggests that a crucial element of the process is being under-prioritised: renewable energy infrastructure. Decarbonising transport requires increases in adoption of electric vehicles, but that will only happen at scale if people can reliably and quickly charge their vehicles. The widespread adoption of heat pumps requires sufficient (clean) electricity to run them. Mitigations are required to manage the greater unpredictability of renewable energy's output; not only is too little energy at the point of need a concern, but, as evidenced in Spain recently, surges and over-supply can also lead to widespread power outages.¹ It is the view of the Committee that the Council should be working with partners to get ahead of these challenges now as a priority, and thus it should be included in the Council's Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 4: That the Cabinet includes a commitment to improve access to renewable energy infrastructure as part of the Strategic Plan

16. Active travel is an area which traverses all aspects of the Council's strategic ambitions: modal shift away from motor vehicles is greener, there are manifold physical and mental health benefits of active travel, and creating the conditions where people may choose active travel is a matter of fairness. It is an aspect of this last point the Committee highlights: the quality of existing footways.
17. Whilst the Council intends to deliver active travel improvements, both cycling and walking, the point is made by the Committee that maintenance of existing footways is more cost-efficient. Those using prams or wheelchairs can be prevented from using a path by defects which are often fairly easy – and cheap – to fix. The ability of residents to engage in active or low-carbon travel relies on full accessibility from end to end; a new bus route will be useless to a resident if they are unable to get the 100 yards to the bus stop from their house. It is the view of the Committee that there is a particularly high return on investment when allocating resources to footway maintenance, and that the benefits are accentuated by the fact that those who will benefit most are likely to be those with specific high-needs, such as the elderly, disabled, or those with young children. Consequently, the Committee recommends that this be adopted as a strategic priority.

¹ [Blackout in Spain and Portugal 'first of its kind', report finds - BBC News](#)

Recommendation 5: That the Cabinet commits to improving footways to facilitate walking within the Strategic Plan

18. Finally under Greener, the Committee makes a simple point. The summary of resident feedback on the draft plan highlights ‘a need for more integrated, dependable, and cost-effective public transport, particularly bus services’ as a priority. The Committee agrees, and considers this aim to entirely consistent with the Council’s broader strategic ambitions for Oxfordshire to become greener, fairer and healthier. The more comprehensive and reliable the bus network, the more residents will want to use it. This will take cars off the road, improve air quality, and provide a cost-effective alternative to taxis for those who do not have access to private vehicles. The Committee recommends that the expansion of access to buses should be a core priority for the Council and included within its Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 6: That the Cabinet commits to expanding access to bus services within the Strategic Plan

Fairer

19. One of the headline projects identified as a means of delivering a fairer Oxfordshire is the roll-out of ‘a network of family and community hubs across the county during 2026 and 2027 in areas of need.’ It suggested by the Committee that the Council should more directly align with and reference the Best Start initiative in the Strategic Plan to draw on the links with and the positive public perception of its successor, Sure Start.

Recommendation 7: That the Cabinet raises the profile of Best Start as a successor to Sure Start within the Strategic Plan

20. In April 2025, Council passed a motion stating ‘Council requests the relevant Cabinet member for Community and Corporate Services and the Cabinet Member for Finance to take a lead from forward-thinking colleagues at Buckinghamshire Council and, working with its Town Council, and District Council partners, invite banks and building societies that have left – or are due to leave – our high streets to explore opportunities to work with this Council to set up similar banking hubs within appropriate Council libraries.’
21. The Committee fully supports this motion: banking facilities are one of the core services upon which a viable high street depends. The Committee reminds Cabinet that this is the most rural county in South East England and that Oxfordshire is more than its urban conurbations. If the Council intends to support its market towns and reduce the need to travel to the major urban centres in the county, safeguarding banking facilities is an absolute must. Equally, ensuring access to banking facilities is also a matter of inclusion: those who are least likely to be using internet banking are also those who may struggle to travel long distances to a bank. So central is this access that the Committee considers that it should be a strategic priority for the Council and referenced in the Strategic Plan.

22. In addition to this, however, the Committee also recognises that there is cross over between banking and another core service: post offices. It suggests that, whilst the Council is exploring the establishment of banking hubs, it should also give consideration as to how it can increase access to post office services.

Recommendation 8: That the Cabinet commits to increasing access to community banking and post office services as part of the Strategic Plan.

General Recommendations

23. A point of feedback from the Committee is its disappointment at the inaccessibility of certain parts of the report it received. Whilst it is clear that efforts had been made to use plain language, the use of local authority vocabulary which presupposes a high degree of familiarity with the topics being discussed is a pitfall which must be avoided. The Committee highlights the use of 'mobility hubs' as a good example of a phrase commonly used within the local authority – and in the draft Strategic Plan – but not understood outside that context.
24. Of even greater concern was that a number of members of the Committee were left unable to read comments made by residents owing to the formatting of the report submitted, with the text being in a small and faint font even when viewed on a screen. In view of the fact that the Council is under a legal duty via the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 to ensure that its reports are accessible this is disappointing. The Committee suggests that a good way to make Oxfordshire fairer and more inclusive would be to ensure that this issue of accessibility is remedied by the time the report asking Council to adopt the Strategic Plan is published.

Recommendation 9: That the Cabinet improves the accessibility of its report by the time it is published for consideration by Council, both in terms of terminology and the presentation of feedback from residents.

25. The Committee appreciates that the content of the Strategic Plan is a delicate balance between a realistic assessment of how things are at present on one hand, and producing a viable but pithy outline of the improvements the Council intends to make and the steps that will require on the other. Part of being realistic is recognising need and the pressures the Council faces, which the Strategic Plan does. For instance, highlighting the number of areas falling within the poorest 20% nationally in the indices of multiple deprivation and, also, the challenges of an ageing population. It is, however, also important when being realistic that the Council can point to its track record and previous achievements as a means of establishing credibility for its future plans. To bolster public acceptance it is important to underline that the Council is not starting from zero, and that it has already taken significant steps to make

Oxfordshire greener, fairer and healthier. The view of the Committee is that the draft plan does not highlight the Council's existing momentum sufficiently.

Recommendation 10: That the Cabinet focuses not only on local need or deficits, but that it also recognises and celebrates its successes to date.

26. The process of identifying the Council's intended destination in 2028 and the route by which it intends to get there is a necessary, vital in fact, step. However, on its own it is not sufficient and it is crucial that progress is monitored to ensure the Council remains on track. The Committee, therefore, welcomes plans to develop a Citizens Portal which will monitor and transparently share with the public the Council's performance. The Committee's request is simply that members, who have the ear of resident concerns and have a democratic mandate to represent them, are fully engaged with the development of the Citizens Portal to ensure that the information it shares addresses the concerns of residents.

Recommendation 11: That members are engaged in the development of the Citizens Portal.

OBSERVATIONS

27. As the consultation and engagement summary on the Strategic Plan states, there is 'notable consistency amongst Oxfordshire residents when identifying priorities for future focus'. The first listed of these is 'coordinated and higher quality road repairs.' One aspect of frustration fed back from residents via the Committee was over a perception that the Council's highways repairs were not always likely to be long-lasting. To address this, it would be of great help if the Council were to make available, either to members or to the public at large, information on the cost-benefits of different road repair types, to explain the Council's approach and its justification.
28. Another area of particular frustration highlighted was the quality of road repairs after utility works. If the Council is able to influence this as the Highways Authority to drive up standards, significant deterioration of the road network could be avoided without significant financial outlay.

Observation 1: That the state of the highways is of particular importance to residents, and that there is particular value in explaining the Council's approach to different types of repair, and focusing on improving the state of roads following utility works.

29. The Committee appreciates that demographic changes, with reductions in the number of school-age children, poses a challenge to the Council of managing reductions the concomitant reduction in school places efficiently and equitably. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee did consider a report on School Place Planning and Delivery in March 2025

without making any recommendations. However, given the great consequence of decisions made in this arena, the Committee asks that the Council continues to treat good monitoring and planning of demand for school places as a priority area.

Observation 2: That it is important that the Council continues to monitor and plan reductions in school places as demand reduces

30. In discussing schools, the point was made that some schools in impacted areas have expressed concern over the Council's congestion charge plans and the potential negative impacts on staff recruitment and retention. Whilst the decision is now made, the Committee hopes that the Council will remain open to discussions over additional mitigations should these fears be fully realised.

Observation 3: That there is concern amongst some schools impacted by the congestion charge of difficulties in recruitment and retention.

31. The Committee welcomes the Council's recent commitment to being a Marmot county, which brings with it a commitment to address social inequalities which cause poorer health outcomes for the less affluent. Of these, the Committee is of the view that policies supporting activity and healthy-eating, particularly for the young, are of especial importance as lack of access to these tends to have lifelong impacts on children and young people's health and wellbeing. The Committee lauds the inclusion of the YouMove programme within the draft Strategic Plan, but asks that particular attention is given to issues around activity and nutrition within the Council's policy development more broadly.

Observation 4: That the Council recognises the fundamental importance of improved diet and exercise, particularly for young people, if a healthier Oxfordshire is to be delivered

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

32. The Committee is unlikely to review the complete Strategic Plan again. However, the Committee and other Overview and Scrutiny committees will consider different aspects of the Plan in addition to it forming part of the wider context of its ongoing Scrutiny.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

33. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'
34. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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