

Divisions Affected - All

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

16 April 2024

OCC Circular Economy Strategy & Action Plan

Report by Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment & Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - Note the programme of work's scope and approach and officers' progress to date;
 - Comment on the proposed vision, goals, and principles for the draft strategy;
 - Comment on the proposed focus areas for delivering this strategy;

Executive Summary

2. Over the past six months, OCC has accelerated a programme of work developing a circular economy strategy and action plan. This programme of work will play a key role helping the Council realise net zero. It intends to go 'beyond waste', focusing not only on reducing waste and emissions, but also on wider benefits for Oxfordshire's communities, economy, and environment. Officers have developed an early draft strategy outlining OCC's vision, principles, and goals, buttressed by three more detailed pieces of work to support the realisation of this vision.
 - Firstly, a draft action plan focusing on embedding circular economy principles into OCC procurement, planning, policy, property & infrastructure, IT equipment, staff learning, and measurement & monitoring.
 - Secondly, Oxfordshire Resources and Waste Partnership (ORWP) have signed off a Household Waste Prevention Strategy.
 - Thirdly, officers have drafted a research paper outlining options that will enable Oxfordshire's transition to a circular economy.

Background: What and why?

3. **Mandate:** In 2019 Oxfordshire County Council declared a climate emergency. The Council is committed to reaching net zero as a council by 2030 and enabling Oxfordshire to be carbon neutral by 2050 at the latest. The County Council's Climate Action Framework notes the importance of resource consumption and the role circular economy must play in this transition. The following all commit to developing a circular economy strategy:
 - OCC's Climate Action Framework
 - OCC's Environmental Principles
 - OCC's Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement

4. **What is a circular economy?** The circular economy is a system where materials almost never become waste and nature is regenerated.¹
 - Currently, in our linear economy we *take, make, use, and dispose*. We take resources from the ground, air, and water; we make them into products and structures; we use them and then we dispose of them.
 - In a circular economy we would reduce material and energy use in the first instance, keep materials in use for as long as possible, and cycle and reuse materials at their highest value.
5. In a circular economy, we would use less resources and energy by rethinking what we need and refusing what is not needed. Products and infrastructure would be designed thinking about their whole life so people could easily repair, re-purpose, and refurbish them. Resources would be kept in use for as long as possible at the highest possible value, and as resources come to the end of their life, we would recover and regenerate and recycle materials.
 - At the household level circular examples include sharing and borrowing items rather than purchasing new, repairing electricals, selling or donating items we no longer need to others, and where possible purchasing what we need second hand, extending its useful life.
 - In the council context, examples could include the use of reused or recycled materials in infrastructure construction, refurbishing buildings and equipment where possible, reviewing our policy around ICT equipment to ensure more items are collected and redistributed rather than purchasing new, setting targets for reuse/repair in all contracts (for example mobility and healthcare aids or ICT equipment) and the use of goods with recycled content.
6. OCC and wider Oxfordshire already do a lot of work that aligns with the principles of a circular economy. This strategy will celebrate this work and highlight Oxfordshire's role as a leader and innovator in this area. We can build on this while acknowledging that the linear economy remains dominant in Oxfordshire, and that we must now work to translate pockets of best practice into full scale change.

Why a circular economy?

7. There are many benefits of a circular economy, far beyond reducing waste. A circular economy will bring benefits to Oxfordshire's communities, economy, and environment. And, importantly, the shift to a circular economy is necessary to meet net zero targets.

¹ [What is a circular economy? | Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#)

Environment	Social	Economic	Council Focused
Central to achieving our net zero commitment – up to 45% of greenhouse gas emissions come from production of products and food ²	Circular activities are delivered on a local level, fostering communities, help tackle loneliness, and gain from our residents’ skills and strengths	Circular economy enables good, clean, and inclusive growth that keeps wealth local	Business resilience: resource scarcity poses serious concerns for business resilience (as exemplified by recent energy inflation costs.) Circulating resources locally develops resilience to global fluctuations and the rapidly growing risk of resource scarcity.
The circular economy protects, restores, and regenerates the natural world and prevents overextraction of resources	The circular economy is in line with OCC’s ‘Oxfordshire Way’ vision for social care and Public Health’s community-based prevention focus—and can support residents’ independence and wellbeing.	It is estimated that transitioning to a circular economy could bring direct economic benefit to Oxfordshire business between £400m and £500m each year. It would also bring £1bn of wider societal benefit per year as well as about 6,000-7,000 jobs. ³	The circular economy can help to reduce core business costs; OCC is forecasting £30m+ spend on household waste management in 2023/24 and estimates for 2024/25 are higher still. Preventing and reducing household waste across Oxfordshire will help to mitigate these costs

Corporate policies and priorities

8. Circular economy work will contribute to OCC’s goal to be greener, healthier, and fairer. It will contribute towards corporate priorities 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9: addressing the climate emergency, tackling inequalities, supporting residents’ health and wellbeing, investing in a sustainable transport network, preserving and restore green spaces, and working with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
9. A circular economy strategy neatly intersects with various other OCC/partnership policies and strategies (Appendix 1), and we are working to ensure goals and actions align and enhance rather than duplicate effort.

² <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/climate/overview>

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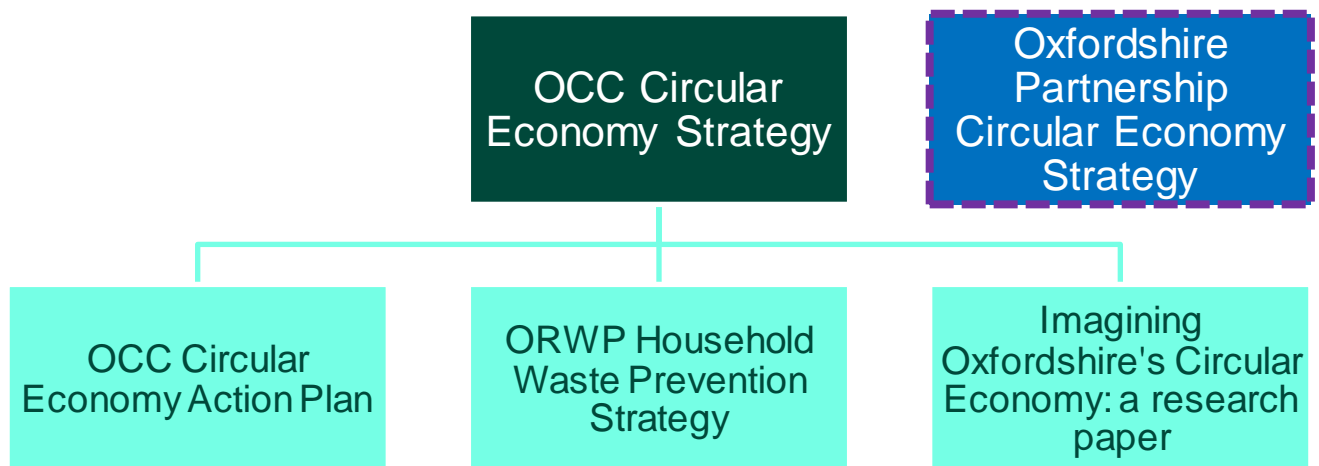
Program of work and progress to date

10. OCC has developed a multi-pronged approach to embedding circular economy principles into OCC and Oxfordshire more broadly.
11. **Strategy:** Firstly to 'get our own house in order', OCC have developed a draft vision and set of goals and principles for OCC's Circular Economy Strategy. This document lays out a circular economy vision that allows OCC to tackle four spheres over which OCC has different levels of control/influence:
 - 1) **OCC's direct activities** such as the waste our day-to-day operations generate and the products we buy.
 - 2) **OCC's procured goods and services**, such as major infrastructure projects and social care contracts which are procured/commissioned by OCC and delivered by suppliers—this is where the majority of OCC's material footprint and GhG emissions come from.
 - 3) **Oxfordshire households:** OCC and the city and district councils are responsible for collecting, managing, and processing household waste.
 - 4) **The wider Oxfordshire economy**, which OCC does not control but can influence.

An overview of this draft strategy, our draft vision, principals, and goals on which we would welcome input on can be found in Appendix 2.
12. **OCC Circular Economy action plan** – focusing on (1) and (2) above. Officers have developed a draft set of actions which will cover the next three years until 2027. Officers plan to focus on procurement, policy, planning, property & infrastructure, ITID, staff learning, and measurement and metrics. An overview of this draft action plan can be found below (Appendix 3).
13. Oxfordshire Resources and Waste Partnership (**ORWP's Household Waste Prevention Strategy**) – focusing on (3) which has been agreed by ORWP board and is the process of being taken through each council's respective governance process to be formally adopted.
14. Officers have rolled out a **staff learning program** on the circular economy for over 100 staff across the organisation, including via Lunch & Learns and the Staff-Led Climate Action Group which has already resulted in considerable improvement of understanding in this area (evaluation details in Appendix 4).
15. **Imagining Oxfordshire's Circular Economy: a research paper** outlining how the broader Oxfordshire economy can realise circular economy principles – focusing on (4). This draft list of ideas has been developed working with academics and researchers, community groups, circular economy practitioners, and specialist sustainability consultants. **N.B. these are only ideas at present and there is not currently resource or agreement to deliver these actions. Future conversations with key partners will be crucial to shaping and refining this list.** Nonetheless, imagining what is possible is the key first step to generating that resource and agreement.
16. In addition, officers have developed the foundations for an **Oxfordshire-wide partnership strategy**. This will be developed working with city and district

councils, NHS partners, local universities, the voluntary and community sector, and local businesses. Officers have developed a mandate for this work having spoken to leads for waste and climate across all 6 councils, including the Oxfordshire Resources and Waste Partnership, and officers working on communities, economic development, and planning. Officers have also spoken to the Local Enterprise Partnership, Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership, Future Oxfordshire Partnership, and senior leaders within the NHS. On this firm foundation, officers spoke to Oxfordshire’s Chief Executive Officers in late February who agreed this was an exciting and worthwhile project. This strategy, which will report into the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, and whose development should start this calendar year, will support the broader Oxfordshire economy to become a circular economy. **This piece of work lies outside the scope of this paper** but is intended to build on the work outlined here.

Figure 1. Circular economy program of work



Key Points

17. **Beyond waste:** The circular economy goes ‘beyond waste’. Many are familiar with the saying “reduce, reuse, recycle”, but often jump to recycling too soon. This program of work is about pushing beyond recycling: reducing what resources are used in the first place and reusing resources already in circulation. Thinking more about connected, sharing communities, product design that eliminates waste, and creating jobs in re-use, repair, and remanufacturing. By doing so, OCC can build societal benefits into the resource and material economy.
18. **Long-term commitment:** Transitioning to a circular economy is not a quick task. This program of work, spearheaded by OCC’s Circular Economy Strategy, represents a long-term commitment to make this shift.
19. **Building foundations:** In seeking to transition to a circular economy OCC joins a select number of councils innovating and leading in this area. This strategy therefore offers a high level vision and direction with a focus on building understanding as well as identifying quick wins and obvious focus areas (e.g. the built environment). Metrics to measure circular economy progress are still

in development and as staff gain a better understanding of the circular economy and how it relates to their area, and once we start regularly collecting relevant data, OCC can re-visit this strategy to identify priority resource streams, outline baseline measurements, and set performance goals.

20. **Translating strategy into reality:** it is crucial that strategies with bold visions like this are backed by action plans, governance frameworks, and performance monitoring approaches that enable real change. That is why a strategy and action plan have been developed together. As part of this OCC will outline a priority action to collect appropriate data to understand OCC's baseline performance. This will enable OCC to outline performance goals. However, it is worth noting that the strategy is intended to focus on long-term change of 15+ years, while the action plan is intended to focus on the next three years. It will therefore be crucial to re-develop the action plan so that it continues to deliver more and more ambitious change.

Stakeholder engagement

21. The process of developing this program of work has been led by a cross-organisational steering group and has involved engaging a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.
22. **Internal engagement:** In addition to the steering group (formed of officers across various teams including: waste and circular economy, biodiversity, climate action, healthy place shaping, minerals and waste planning, property, economy, and procurement), officers consulted with a wide range of teams, especially operational teams in priority areas, to develop the strategy and the action plan.
23. **External engagement:** Officers have engaged with the wider policy ecosystem so that this program of work is founded on cutting edge research and practice. They have learned from other local authorities, other countries, circular economy thinktanks and organisations, and local researchers and academics (Appendix 5). Officers have additionally hosted two external workshops to help develop policy and refine our vision.

Next steps

24. Officers will continue to develop and refine the strategy, action plan, and research paper over the coming months with the aim of seeking approval at Cabinet in Autumn 24.
25. ORWP officers will take the Household Waste Prevention Strategy through each council's respective governance process for adoption.
26. Officers aim to bring together partners across Oxfordshire over the coming months to develop an Oxfordshire circular economy strategy. Officers aim to bring this to FOP Environment Advisory Group in July.

Financial Implications

27. There is **no specific budgetary requirement** for writing the strategy and action plan, but existing staff time will be required to write them,. This may impact other work, but not adversely.
28. Delivery of the action plan **will have budgetary implications**. For significant proposals herein, officers will draw up business cases, include within service and resource planning processes and follow appropriate governance routes for sign-off. Officers will be mindful of the council's financial position when developing the action plan and related timescales for implementation.

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Staff Implications

29. Development of the strategy and action plan forms part of the ongoing service delivery plan for the Circular Economy and Waste Management team
30. Delivery of the strategy will require resources from all departments as identified in the action plan. The staffing requirements will be incorporated within business cases and service and resource planning processes.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

31. OCC's early draft strategy has an explicit goal to save money for residents, especially important given the cost of living crisis context. By increasing resource efficiency and reducing excess material use in products, costs should be reduced. Similarly, only consuming what is necessary and reducing waste should reduce costs for residents.
32. OCC's early draft strategy has "just transition" as a principle. The transition to a circular economy is necessary to create a sustainable future for future generations. However, it's also important to transition in a way that is fair and just for people now—and reduces rather than increases inequality. At present, different people have different access to a circular economy. The place people live in affects the choices they make and their behaviours: what they buy, share, re-use, repair, and throw away. OCC will create places that support people to easily make sustainable decisions.
33. In developing the action plan route map document, officers will consider potential impact on protected groups and how to promote equity across different groups, especially in a context where residents continue to experience the impacts of the cost of living crisis.
34. A full EQIA will be developed as part of the strategy approval process.

Sustainability Implications

35. Adoption and implementation of circular economy principles and practices will play an important role realising the Council's net zero commitments. Reduced

consumption, improved recycling and reusing, and regenerating nature should also contribute to the Council's green spaces priority.

36. A full CIA will be developed as part of the strategy approval process.

Risk Management

37. Delivery of the action plan is likely to require additional resources in some areas which is not currently funded. Officers will consider the council's financial position in mind while developing the action plan. There is a risk that sufficient resources may not be available which could delay or restrict action plan delivery.
38. Officers may identify OCC resource use where they are unable to shift to a circular flow of resources—or which can only be shifted with significant financial investment. Each individual project on the action plan will be given an associated risk assessment. Officers will bear this risk and the Council's financial position in mind when developing the strategy.

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Appendix 1: OCC Partnership strategies that intersect with Circular Economy goals:

OCC strategies	Corporate strategies	Partnership strategies
Environmental Principles	Property strategy	Pathways to Zero Carbon Oxfordshire
Climate Action Framework Carbon Management Plan & Policy Position on Reducing Oxfordshire County Councils Supply Chain Emissions	Commercial strategy (forthcoming)	Local Nature Recovery Strategy (forthcoming 2025)
Climate adaptation strategy (forthcoming)	Social value strategy	Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy
Biodiversity action framework (forthcoming)		Good Food Oxfordshire food strategy
Household Waste and Recycling Centre (HWRC) Strategy		Strategic Economic Plan Local Industrial Strategy Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP) Charter
		Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030
Air Quality Strategy		Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan

39. The circular economy strategy also intersects neatly with various approaches OCC is promoting, including:
- Future Generations
 - Doughnut Economics
 - Healthy place shaping
 - Community wealth building
 - Anchor institutions network

Appendix 2: Draft Strategy Vision, Principles, and Goals

40. This section provides a high level overview of OCC's early draft strategy. Officers propose that the strategy's timeframe spans 2024-2040, with five year reviews.
41. **Our Vision:** To enable and support Oxfordshire's transition to a circular economy, reimagining how we value, produce, and use resources so they benefit our people, place, and planet.

42. Principles

- **Beyond Waste:** OCC will think about circular economy in the round, not just about waste and recycling.
- **Doughnut economics & planetary boundaries:** Transitioning to a circular economy helps OCC to do even more to support a strong social foundation while also staying within our planetary boundaries.
- **Future Generations:** OCC will work to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.
- **Innovation:** OCC will support and enable Oxfordshire to lead, learn from, and contribute to the international innovation community.
- **Towards system change:** We must all move from small pockets of best practice to full system change with circular economy principles at its core.
- **Just transition:** OCC will ensure the transition to a circular economy is fair and just, so that all residents can equally benefit from a circular Oxfordshire .

43. Goals

1. **Look after our planet** by consuming resources sustainably, mitigating and adapting to climate change, and regenerating nature
2. **Support a fair economy** which keeps resources local, drives economic resilience and innovation, and generates inclusive jobs and skills for people in Oxfordshire
3. **Create healthy and connected communities**, supporting residents to be independent and healthier for longer
4. **Become a more resilient council** that offers better value for money

Each goal comprises a set of sub-goals, as follows.

44. **Look after our planet.** Transitioning to a circular economy will not only be key to achieving net zero but also help us adapt to climate change, regenerate nature, protect our air, soil, and water, reduce waste, and protect earth's resources into the future.
 - Goal 1.1: Reduce emissions and contribute to net zero
 - Goal 1.2: Regenerate nature and increase biodiversity
 - Goal 1.3: Prevent pollution of our air, soil, and water
 - Goal 1.4: Climate adaptation
 - Goal 1.5: Prevent and reduce waste
 - Goal 1.6: Protect the earth's resources
45. **A fair economy.** Changing how we manage, produce, and consume resources can stimulate an innovative, inclusive economy that tackles inequalities.
 - Goal 2.1: Stimulating economic opportunity
 - Goal 2.2: Supporting an inclusive economy
 - Goal 2.3: Saving money for residents and businesses
 - Goal 2.4: Globally just

46. **Creating healthy and connected communities.** How we interact with our resources has a real impact on how we interact with each other. Sustainable, responsible production and management of resources can bring communities together and help residents stay fit and healthy for longer.
- Goal 3.1: Creating connected communities
 - Goal 3.2: Supporting the Oxfordshire Way
 - Goal 3.3: Ensuring all residents can breathe safely
47. **A resilient council.** The circular economy will help OCC become more resilient to resource scarcity and geopolitical instability while delivering better value for money for residents.
- Goal 4.1: Improving council resilience
 - Goal 4.2: Delivering value for money

Appendix 3: Draft Action Plan Priorities

48. This section provides a high level overview of OCC's early draft action plan. Officers propose that the action plan spans 2024-2027.
49. Officers propose 7 priority areas for action:
- 1) Procurement
 - 2) Planning
 - 3) Policy
 - 4) Property & infrastructure
 - 5) IT equipment
 - 6) Staff learning
 - 7) Measurement and metrics
- Each of these is outlined in more detail below.
50. **Procurement:** OCC will work with existing suppliers to become more circular and embed the circular economy into the procurement process. This includes continuing to embed circular economy into its social value procurement process, reviewing OCC Facilities Management waste contracts, building measurement and reporting into specifications for high materiality contracts, and supporting relevant service areas to use the procurement process to improve resource efficiency in contracts e.g. adult social care and catering contracts.
51. **Planning:** OCC will use its planning functions to promote the circular economy within national frameworks. The Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan Part 1 – Core Strategy contains policies that promote reuse and recycling and embeds circular economy principles. For example, policies supporting the use of recycled and secondary aggregates in preference to virgin aggregates. The County Council is embarking on a new Minerals and Waste Local Plan and will seek to continue to include Circular Economy principles within future minerals and waste planning policies, while seeking to achieve a sound plan.

52. In addition, OCC will research and review Biodiversity Net Gain at restored quarries and influence other planning stakeholders including District councils, central government, regional minerals and waste bodies, and neighbouring Minerals and Waste planning authorities.
53. OCC will also explore opportunities to write s106 agreements in such a way that they enable development of capital projects that fully embed circular economy principles.
54. **Policy:** OCC will ensure that the circular economy is considered in appropriate policies and strategies and continue to deliver key existing internal plans and strategies that already support circular economy principles. This includes OCC's furniture disposal policy, central corporate policy team, food strategy and action plan, biodiversity action framework, approaches to green finance and healthy place shaping, as well as partnership strategies such as the Strategic Economic Plan, Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
55. **Property and infrastructure:** OCC will develop transport and property infrastructure that is designed with the circular economy in mind. This will enable us to use less virgin material, reduce emissions, and prevent waste arisings. Opportunities include the re-development of Speedwell House and decommissioning of County Hall, working with current suppliers to identify resource efficiency opportunities, putting in place governance, frameworks, and tools to consider resource use and circular economy, and working towards default circular design for OCC major property and infrastructure projects.
56. **IT equipment.** OCC will responsibly buy, manage, reuse, and dispose of our high value IT equipment. In the first instance, staff will repair and redeploy devices; after this, staff are exploring a formal route for donating devices to Getting Oxfordshire Online towards our digital inclusion goals. OCC is looking into its management and disposal of work phones and reviewing its Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) disposal supplier.
57. **Staff learning programme.** Rolling out a learning programme across the council explaining the circular economy, why it matters, and how all staff can help deliver a circular economy.
58. **Measurement and metrics.** OCC will develop a clearer picture of the County Council's own waste footprint. OCC will also work to develop a set of metrics to measure how 'circular' the council's activities are, including suppliers. OCC will work to embed reporting requirements into appropriate specifications and contracts to enable reporting on the most significant contributor to OCC's material footprint: procured services and goods.

Appendix 4: Evaluation from staff learning

59. This appendix evaluates the staff learning program to date.
60. **Evaluation – understanding 'circular economy':** On average officers started the session rating their understanding of the term 'circular economy' at 2.6/5.

On average, by the end of the training session, officers rated their understanding as 4.4/5. This represents a strong and significant increase in understanding.

61. **Further evaluation** – across all staff learning sessions, on average staff rated the session as follows:

- (1) 'The session was well-run': 9.2/10
- (2) 'The session applied to me': 9.1/10
- (3) 'I'm passionate about circular economy': 9.3/10

Appendix 5: External stakeholders consulted

- Brighton and Hove city council
- City of London Authority
- West Midlands Combined Authority
- Islington Council
- Warwickshire CC
- Re-London (a circular economy partnership of the Mayor of London and the London boroughs)
- QSA (specialist sustainability consultancy)
- Oxfordshire's rich network of Community Action Groups
- Researchers at Oxford University's Environment and Change Institute (ECI)
- Researchers at Oxford University's Smith School