

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 18 June 2024

Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee (2023/24)

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - 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 Place 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.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan at its final meeting of the 2023/24 municipal year on 17 April 2024.
4. The Committee was grateful to Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations, Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place, Rachel Burns, Team Leader Waste Strategy and Circular Economy, and Jamie Slagel, National Management Trainee, for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

SUMMARY

5. The report before the Committee set out officers' progress to date in developing a circular economy strategy and action plan. This was intended to "go 'beyond waste'" and focussed not only on reducing waste and emissions but also sought to provide wider benefits for residents, for communities, for the economy, and for the environment.
6. The Committee established that this was, in the first instance, an inward-looking approach principally because the Council was aware that it needed to ensure that its practices were appropriate and consistent with the vision it was keen to see implemented countywide. This would be done in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. The draft action plan set out the proposal that there were seven priority areas for action: procurement; planning; policy; property and infrastructure; IT equipment; staff learning; measurement and monitoring.
7. The vision for the strategy was described as being 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." The Committee had a wide discussion and discussed various aspects of the strategy and action plan, particularly focusing on recycling.
8. The Committee made four recommendations. Two of them are about clarifying information and improving communication; one is about ensuring that reduced costs; the other is about encouraging work with neighbouring authorities for cross-border use at Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs) for the benefit of residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. The Committee recognised that, with regard to recycling, considerable successes have been achieved in recent decades in Oxfordshire, rising from a combined recycling and composting rate of 30% in 2004/2005¹ to a current rate of 65.5% of c.40000 tonnes of waste at HWRCs being recycled. The intention to improve reuse will rely on effective communication with residents, businesses, staff, and organisations across the county. If people do not know how best to reuse, it is unlikely that they will do so.
10. In response to a question as to whether onsite reuse sessions might be feasible, the Committee heard that the space constraints at HWRCs would render them unfeasible as the amount of space for on-site reuse is limited at most of them. However, the impression given by, for example, usable bicycles being seemingly discarded is far from ideal. The optics of such are that residents at HWRCs might labour under the misunderstanding that reuse is not actually being put into practice and that the Council is failing to do that which it is calling on others to do. Such misunderstanding could feasibly lead

¹ <https://www.letsrecycle.com/councils/league-tables/2004-05/>

to an undermining of the message the Council is seeking to spread about the importance of reuse. The Committee was clear that HWRCs should make clear to visitors that bicycles, etc., which are intended to be reused are to be reused.

11. Enquiries about opening times and what could be left, as well as how and when, were also raised and the Committee considered it appropriate to submit a recommendation surrounding improved communications more generally, for the benefit of all.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should arrange for improved communications, particularly about reuse, at Household Waste and Recycling Centres and in publicity about the same;

12. The Committee noted that the report before it stated that there is “no specific budgetary requirement for writing the strategy and action plan” and noted that “delivery of the action plan will have budgetary implications.” The Committee sought clarity on this because it was the view of the Committee that part of the success of this strategy will be that it is seen to deliver cost savings to the Council. The Committee anticipated that it would have severe concerns if, instead, it were to result in increased costs and the Committee was pleased that the Cabinet member confirmed it was his expectation that savings would be achieved. The Committee, therefore, called for careful monitoring of the implementation of this strategy to ensure that savings are made as a result of it.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should ensure that the outworking of the Circular Economy Strategy results in reduced costs and can demonstrate the scale of savings achieved;

13. When the Committee considered the Household Waste and Recycling Strategy on 28 June 2023, it suggested that officers should investigate how reciprocal arrangements could be introduced for the ease of residents, particularly those who live near county borders, so that Oxfordshire residents could use HWRCs across the border in the same way that non-Oxfordshire residents can currently use Oxfordshire ones.
14. The Committee was disappointed to hear that discussions with one neighbouring authority in particular had so far proven fruitless, as that authority had asked for more money than it costs to run an HWRC for a year. The Committee recognised that would not be either reasonable or realistic. However, the Committee could point to authorities such as Hertfordshire, Suffolk, and Essex County Councils which have arrangements with neighbouring authorities. These are not fully reciprocal but do offer some flexibility. The models adopted in those places may not transfer identically to Oxfordshire but seeking advice and insight from those councils as well as others would seem to be in the best interests of residents.

15. The Committee believed that cross-border recycling arrangements would be an important benefit for Oxfordshire residents and so called on the Council to continue pursuing this matter.

Recommendation 3: That the Council should work to introduce cross-border arrangements with neighbouring authorities so that Oxfordshire residents can use Household Waste and Recycling Centres outside the county;

16. The Committee established that considerable work had been done with councils and organisations across the county and more widely to develop the foundations for an Oxfordshire-wide partnership circular economy strategy which will report into the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and has been developed with a mandate from both the Council and all five district councils. The Committee was told that this is a separate piece of work to that of the Council's own Circular Economy Strategy but there is inevitably overlap. This partnership will be key for the success of the Circular Economy Strategy internally and externally and the Committee is pleased that the Council is committed to that partnership working. In order for partnership to be fruitful, though, it is important for expectations and understandings to be shared and agreed.
17. The Committee considered that, whilst the Council's approach was implicit in the report and in conversation with members, it would be helpful for all partners for the Council to set out explicitly its role within the Oxfordshire Partnership Circular Economy Strategy and that it should set out how it will build the partnerships it is committed to building.

Recommendation 4: That the Council should make explicit its role in the Circular Economy Strategy as a lead partner and set out how it will build partnerships both within the county and across county borders.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

18. The new Committee may return to this matter in the 2024/2025 municipal year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

19. 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.
20. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

Contact Officer: Richard Doney
Scrutiny Officer
richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk
Tel: 07745 210056

June 2024