

# **REPORT OF THE PERFORMANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: SCRUTINY OF THE COUNCIL'S PROPOSED STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-25**

Cllr Eddie Reeves

Chair of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

January 2023

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to:
  - a) Note the observations contained in the body of this report and to respond to the recommendation with the proposed response in Annex 1, 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. This report contains both observations and a formal recommendation from the Scrutiny Committee. Under section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000 the Cabinet has a duty to respond to formal recommendations. It does not have to respond to the observations, though it may do so if it wishes.

## **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. At its meeting on 19 January 2023, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Council's proposed Strategic Plan covering the period 2023-2025. The Committee would like to thank all Cabinet members and senior officers for its development, and particularly Cllrs Leffman, Phillips and Enright, who fielded the majority of questions at Committee.
4. The details of the Strategic Plan were included within the Committee's budget papers, which is logical. However, the Committee has decided to write a separate report for reasons of clarity and ease of access for the public.

## **SUMMARY**

5. Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, provided an overview of the Council's proposed Strategic Plan for 2023/24 to 2025/26 to the Committee.

6. The 2023-2025 framework was built from nine strategic priorities, 25 commitments and 49 objectives, of which the latter were SMART and would be summarised in a report to Cabinet on a bimonthly basis. This draft Strategic Plan would be considered at Council following approval of the budget.
7. Cllr Glynis Phillips, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, added that the nine strategic priorities were grouped into three themes – ‘greener, fairer, healthier’ – and were linked to engagement and consultation feedback received from Oxfordshire Conversation, budget consultation and the resident satisfaction survey.
8. Whilst mainly a continuation of the previous Strategic Plan there were two new objectives which related to the cost of living crisis and the NHS and integrated care system.
9. An annual performance report would capture the achievement, success and challenges throughout the first year of the Strategic Plan. At the end of the fourth quarter, the underlying supporting performance measures across all nine priorities would be reviewed and updated. Targets enabling the delivery of the priorities would also be reviewed, updated and reported within a business management report that was considered at Cabinet on a bi-monthly basis.
10. In response, the Committee explored a number of issues, most notably around which priorities were felt to be the most crucial by the administration; monitoring and reporting arrangements; the benefits and challenges of partnership working; the links between the Strategic Plan and other Budget and Policy Framework documents; green growth and rural transport. The report makes a number of observations and one formal recommendation. These comments focus on i) the relationship between the Strategic Plan and other Budget and Policy Framework documents, and ii) – iv) issues arising from discussion on inequality, partnership working and overlooked commitments.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **i) Budget and Policy Framework**

11. The most important policy documents the Council produces form what is known as the Budget and Policy Framework, those documents which are of such significance that they are not delegated to the Cabinet to agree but must be put before full Council for adoption and within the terms of which all Cabinet decisions must remain. Whilst a Strategic Plan summarises the Council’s high-level ambitions, much of the heavy lifting of seeing those ideals realised is actually achieved through the policies contained within the Budget and Policy Framework. As such, it would be good practice to ensure a clear consistency in approach between the Council’s overarching strategic direction and these policies. The Performance and Corporate Services Committee has provided its comment on the budget and the difficulties it, and therefore perhaps the public also, finds in determining whether the Council’s spending

apportionments reflect its strategic priorities. However, the same is true in relation to the recently-agreed Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, another Policy Framework document. The Committee suggests that they, and the public, should be able to be assured that the Council's stated aspirations are underpinned by a wider policy framework which also aligns with them. The Committee notes that alongside the Strategic Plan lie 49 objectives which will help in illustrating this, but it is of the view that there should be a more direct commentary on how the outline of what the Council has agreed to do in its Budget and Policy Framework aligns with the strategic priorities it has chosen to address.

**Observation 1: That there is not a clear way to see how (or whether) the Council's proposed Strategic Plan corresponds to what it has already committed to do within its Budget and Policy Framework, and if this is a challenge for the Committee it is liable to be even more acute for members of the public.**

**ii) Partnership Working**

12. The stated vision of the Council in its Strategic Plan is 'to lead positive change by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county'. Partnership working is clearly foundational to what the Council wishes to achieve, yet the Committee has two points it wishes to make about this in relation to the draft proposals.

13. The first is to recognise that working with others can act as a multiplier, that by partnering with those with particular skills, knowledge and capacity in a certain area – be they private sector, other areas of the public sector or members of the VCS, large or small – well-designed co-working can yield outsized benefits for the Council and for residents. However, for this to be the case it is necessary to have something to multiply in the first place, or you end up with nothing. This is to say that the Committee recognises the core requirement for partnership working, but to note that partnership working does not obviate the need for the Council to achieve certain things irrespective of whether its partners contribute as fully as anticipated. The Strategic Plan is, after all, a strategic plan for the Council, and not a partnership of all its stakeholders. The Committee would prefer to see greater focus on the Council committing to things which it can deliver, rather than being beholden to the performance of partners. If there is no clear dividing line as to what is the Council's responsibility and what is not there is little accountability if priority outcomes committed to are not delivered.

**Observation 2: That the centrality of partnership working to the Council's Strategic Plan could lead to a blurring of responsibility for outcomes. It is important that the Council shows in its strategic plan what, within the areas for which it holds primary responsibility, it intends to achieve or else it will prove difficult to be held directly accountable for outcomes which have not been realised.**

14. The second point is that in view of the centrality of partnership working, the page of the Strategic Plan dedicated to this topic is remarkably selective, focusing on tackling the cost of living crisis and housing Ukrainian refugees. The point is taken that partnership working is a thread which runs throughout the entire document, but in that case why is it necessary to have a dedicated page detailing two particular instances of partnership working? Particularly as there is a page (Local Businesses and Partners) which provides much broader detail on with whom the Council will work with and to what purpose. The specificity does not draw attention to the breadth of partnership working the Council intends to undertake, it narrows its scope. To the Committee, the exact purpose or intention of this page is not clear, and its contents undermine the strong messaging around partnerships elsewhere in the document. If the Committee is unclear, so too is likely to be this messaging for the public. As such, it suggests revisiting this page to reinforce the partnership working message rather than detract from or confuse it.

**Observation 3: That the page on Working in Partnership is more specific than would be expected for presenting a cross-cutting approach. The consequence is to narrow the focus of the Council's partnership working, which the Committee does not believe to be the original intention.**

### iii) Inequality

15. When asked to identify to the Committee whether within the nine priorities put forward there were any particular overriding or core ones, two were identified: the response to climate change, and tackling inequality. The Committee supports these ambitions and has suggestions as to how both might be extended or better reflected within the Strategic Plan. Concerning inequality, the Committee's primary issue relates to what is written above – that notwithstanding the vital importance of partnership-working in addressing it as an issue, the Council must be assured that in and of itself it can move the dial regarding inequalities in those areas for which it has primary responsibility. The area of focus from the Committee, therefore, is not so much the priority itself but the infrastructure the Council has to support its delivery. As a point across the entire Strategic Plan priorities, but most particularly concerning that relating to tackling inequality, the Committee would like to see clear KPIs which can be used to measure the Council's impact in making progress against its strategic priorities. Measurement of performance, however, is not an end in itself; the Council must have the ability to deliver change, and with this issue being one of the Council's two core corporate priorities it must be assured that it has the organisational capacity to effect change. The Committee is keen that the Council has in place the tools to ensure that its skills, structure, knowledge and resourcing are sufficient to address the current and anticipated social problems and resultant inequalities.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council demonstrates due regard to capacity building within the organisation to tackle social problems and resultant inequalities.**

#### iv) Overlooked Issues

16. Although consideration of the Strategic Plan provides opportunity to explore some of the wider issues around the Council's priorities, more prosaically it also affords the Committee the opportunity to make a case for including issues which are not presently in the text. Of these, the Committee puts forward two.
17. The first concerns rural bus services, a topic which touches on multiple strategic priorities – 'put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work', 'invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network', 'tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire' and 'work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit' most notably. Sufficient service levels, whether there is a bus at all, service standards, whether the bus can be relied upon to be run and keep to schedule, and affordable prices are all core issues for those in rural areas who may wish to use the bus to get to conurbations for employment or recreation, particularly those who are less wealthy. It is the view of the Committee the topic of rural bus services is a nexus where multiple strategic priorities intersect. The Committee would hope that the Council might devote greater space in its Strategic Plan to this issue accordingly owing to the opportunity it affords to make positive contributions to so many of the Council's strategic priorities.

**Observation 4: That the topic of rural bus services acts as a nexus for multiple strategic priorities, meaning progress against which provides progress in many of the Council's priority areas. Accordingly, the Committee would expect greater clarity within the Strategic Plan of the importance of rural bus services.**

18. The second concerns the relative importance of promoting green growth in the county. The Council recognises the urgency required in responding to the effects of climate change, making specific reference to the climate emergency. The challenge it faces is making its own transition to reduced carbon and supporting others in the county to do so in a time where resources are stretched and investment has become historically more expensive to secure. For this to happen, the additional costs involved must largely be covered from trading surpluses rather than subsidy. The Council's response in this regard is intelligent – to seek to facilitate steps which will enable the county to make money from the transition to low carbon by developing and providing the required goods and services. However, there are many steps on the journey, from ideas to objective change on the ground. Intelligent though it is, the Committee is unsure whether the Council's commitment to facilitating research and collaboration is sufficient a contribution, given the importance of this issue, and would suggest that the Council give further thought as to how it might support green growth in addition to its existing commitments.

**Observation 5: That the Council's objective to facilitate research and collaboration to drive environmental innovation may not be sufficiently ambitious a response to Climate Emergency, and it may wish to give further thought as to what else it might do to support local green growth.**

## **NEXT STEPS**

19. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee does not intend to revisit the Strategic Plan until a future iteration is developed.

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Annex 1: Draft Cabinet Response to Recommendations