

OXFORDSHIRE PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Wednesday, 17 April 2024 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.15 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Kieron Mallon - in the Chair
Councillor Robin Bennett
Councillor Ted Fenton
Councillor Nigel Simpson
Councillor Liam Walker
Councillor Richard Webber
Councillor Bethia Thomas

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations
Councillor Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy

Officers: Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place
Rachel Wileman, Director of Planning, Environment, and Climate Change
Rachel Burns, Team Leader Waste for Strategy and Circular Economy
Jamie Slagel, National Management Trainee

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

8/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Enright, Cllr Hicks, and Cllr van Mierlo (substitute: Cllr Thomas).

Cllr Enright attended virtually as a guest of the Committee, at the discretion of the Chair.

Cllr Sudbury had apologised in advance that he would be arriving late.

9/24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda Item 2)

There were none.

10/24 MINUTES

(Agenda Item 3)

5/24 – first paragraph should have ended with a full stop rather than a comma.

Subject to that amendment, the Committee resolved to **AGREE** the minutes of the meeting of 07 February 2024 as a true and accurate record.

11/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda Item 4)

There were none.

12/24 CIRCULAR ECONOMY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

(Agenda Item 5)

Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations, had been invited to present a report on the Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan (the CES). He was accompanied by Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place, Rachel Burns, Team Leader Waste for Strategy and Circular Economy, and Jamie Slagel, National Management Trainee.

Before the Cabinet member's arrival, the Corporate Director for Environment and Place introduced the strategy and likened it to the old-fashioned concept of 'make do and mend', focused on resource conservation. The Team Leader for Waste Strategy and Circular Economy, the National Management Trainee, and their colleagues were commended for their broad thinking in putting together the strategy.

An emerging action plan was focused on the Council improving its own practices. The next steps involved working with district councils to manage waste and collaborating with partners across Oxfordshire to advance this progressive agenda.

The Team Leader for Waste Strategy and Circular Economy highlighted that the discussion revolved around the transition from a linear to a circular economy. The aim was to design items for longevity, using more sustainable, reusable, or recyclable materials, and enabling repair and disassembly at the end of life.

The CES was crucial for the Council to meet its Net Zero targets. The strategy increased resource-security and resilience, especially considering global events impacting activities and costs. It was noted that managing household waste costs around 6% of the Council's budget, a figure that was increasing. Transitioning to a circular economy could help control these costs. The CES would create between 6,000 and 7,000 jobs in Oxfordshire and could add £400m to £500m to the Oxfordshire economy.

The National Management Trainee emphasised the importance of translating strategy into delivery, and an action plan was developed concurrently with the strategy. The focus was on using less, using for longer, and reusing. Seven critical areas were identified for focus.

Procurement was a major focus, as the majority of the Council's material and carbon footprint came from procured services. The Council was committed to embedding the concept of the circular economy in its new contracts.

IT equipment, made up of high-value assets reliant on critical metals, was another important area. Unused equipment could be redeployed within the Council, saving money and having positive environmental impacts by freeing up critical minerals and metals.

To ensure a successful transition from strategy to delivery, measuring and monitoring its impact would be key. The need to identify appropriate metrics for the Council and build processes to collect and report on this data was discussed. This was an emerging field worldwide, with no standardised metric, but work was being done with other councils to develop appropriate metrics for the Council.

The CES laid out the intention to work across the county on a partnership strategy with other councils, universities, the local NHS, businesses, landowners, and the voluntary and community sector. Agreement had already been reached with district councils in Oxfordshire to produce a countywide document.

The Committee discussed multiple issues which included:

- Whether the Council was making the best use of Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs) to reuse household waste and if such centres could become re-using centres feeding directly back to the community.

The HWRCs were quite space-constrained which made onsite re-use difficult. Whilst there was considerable reuse offsite, it was acknowledged that the poor visibility of this work could be improved with a communication plan exhibiting the good work being done to reuse waste. The Council had approved a HWRC strategy last year, which had reuse at its core. The Council was considering its infrastructure needs and planning for future development, with reuse becoming an integral part, recognising the physical constraints of their current sites.

- Concerns were raised about confusion around opening times of waste centres, and whether reciprocal arrangements with other Councils allowing Oxfordshire residents to access their waste centres would be arranged.

Discussions had been continually open with neighbouring authorities about restrictions that only allowed residents to use local sites. Whilst

Oxfordshire HWRCs were open to non-residents, Oxfordshire residents were not permitted to use HWRCs in neighbouring authorities. A reciprocal arrangement had been explored with one neighbouring authority but was deemed too expensive to implement given the amount that authority would have charged. The opening hours had been reduced after consultation with site staff due to low usage during late hours, but the sites remained open for 362 days of the year, including bank holidays and weekends.

- The Committee stressed the importance of forming and working in partnerships within the local community. It was seen that greater partnerships would help embed the concept of a circular economy within the community and help the CES determine what the community needed to aid the circular economy of Oxfordshire, making it easier for waste to re-enter the household or economy. This included coordinating with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP).

A lot of work had been put into laying the foundations for a partnership strategy, which required extensive outreach. Conversations had been held with all relevant Council officers across the six councils in the waste board, climate, communities, and well-being colleagues. Conversations had also been held with all the chief executives, the Local Enterprise Partnership (the LEP), members of the health system, local academic experts, community groups, and some businesses. The next step was to focus on businesses, ensuring that the message to them was clear.

There had been some positive conversations about the LEP now that its functions were the responsibility of the Council. Consideration had been given to the manufacturing industry in Oxfordshire, its shape and size, and how it could be stimulated. There was a focus on green skills and jobs, reminiscent of the repair and remanufacturing skills of previous generations. The concept of industrial symbiosis was explored, where the surplus from one company becomes the raw material for another, saving everyone money. Discussions had been held about how, as a hub of innovation in the country, more circular materials and solutions could be developed and how Oxfordshire could host an accelerator programme for new business.

- The Committee raised the point that the Council needed to ensure its procurement policies fitted into the idea of a circular economy. The Council needed to look at its own resources first when making a procurement decision and whether new purchases were necessary. Whilst procurement was important, the Committee encouraged thought about what more the Council could do across the county.
- The Committee was keen to encourage constant financial monitoring, with cost-based analysis against outcomes. It was hoped that the CES would save money and not create further expenditure. The strategy had no budgetary requirements, but in fact saving should be expected if the Council reused items internally.

- The report referred to a research paper. It was confirmed that paper had been written but that the actions arising from it were not currently funded. The Committee requested sight of the paper.

The Committee will request an update on the strategy and action plan in due course but, in the meantime, resolved to request the follow actions:

- That the strategy, action plan, and research paper should be provided to members of the Committee

The Committee also resolved to **AGREE** recommendations to Cabinet under the following headings:

- That the Council should arrange for improved communications, particularly about reuse, at Household Waste and Recycling Centres and in publicity about the same;
- That the Council should seek to ensure that the outworking of the strategy results in reduced costs;
- That the Council should continue to explore how reciprocal arrangements could be introduced with neighbouring authorities for the ease of residents;
- That the Council should make explicit its role in the strategy as a lead partner and set out how it will build partnerships both within the county and across county borders;

13/24 UPDATE ON INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING AND S.106 CONTRIBUTIONS

(Agenda Item 6)

Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy, had been invited to present a report updating the Committee on the Council's approach Infrastructure Funding and the spending of section 106 contributions. The Infrastructure Funding Statement had been submitted to the Committee at its meeting on 06 December 2023 before being submitted to Cabinet. The large sums of money unspent had also been explored at the Performance Overview & Scrutiny Committee in December and in the latter's scrutiny of the Cabinet's proposed budget. Cllr Roberts was accompanied by Rachel Wileman, Director of Planning, Environment, and Climate Change. It was emphasised that increasing the speed and ease with which moneys were spent was an ongoing process.

The Director of Planning, Environment and Climate Change, commended the Council's ability to collect money, and emphasised that s106 money was often collected and pooled for larger infrastructure projects. A piece of work was underway to look at the flexibility of s106 moneys and to see what money had been spent, what money was committed to be spent, and what money was not currently earmarked. While it was the Services responsibility to take s106 agreements forward and deliver infrastructure, there was also a collective responsibility across the Council to mobilise the money.

Insights were sought from the Committee as to how greater engage localities and members themselves in the spending of s106 moneys. A resources map had been created to look at potential housing sites linked to their planning permission status and whether money had been allocated to those sites.

The Committee raised the following issues:

- The frustration on the part of both members and residents that residents were not getting the infrastructure they were owed from s106 moneys. The apparent lack of transparency over where the money was and how it was being spent – or not – compounded these frustrations.

The Committee was assured that work was already underway on this with using technologies to create a dashboard of infrastructure projects that were in the pipeline and where the funding for these projects was. This dashboard would enable members and residents to monitor projects and to see how moneys were being spent.

- Concerns were raised about the money from s106 being spent correctly on what would benefit the community the most. There were fears that money was being assigned too narrowly and reducing the flexibility of the money, which then failed to benefit the community.

Officers acknowledged that greater partnerships were needed with localities and communities to determine what exactly was needed. The intention was to build a greater narrative with members, who had the knowledge of what was needed. It was hoped that the creation of the dashboard would help to engage members with the potential projects and the status of funding for those projects.

- The prospect of having a s106 officer per locality was raised a method of ensuring focus within each locality for the spending of these moneys.

The Committee was given a rough breakdown of how s106 moneys were monitored by various services and teams, with no discrete teams working on any dedicated moneys. Assurances were made that significant progress had been made on processes to ensure information about moneys was trackable and accessible for officers. This meant no information about projects and funding would be lost due to staff turnover.

The need for greater partnerships was highlighted here to ensure those impacted by projects were clear who was responsible for that particular project.

- The viability of including Cabinet members on the Strategic Capital Board (SCB) was raised as a means of increasing political oversight and responsibility for s106 projects.

The purpose of the SCB was explained to the Committee as an officer-led board set up to deliver oversight on existing projects, and to help develop the annual programme of future projects.

- The benefits of using section 278 (s278), of the Highways Act 1980, to build network infrastructure before housing developments were brought to the Committee's attention, with previous examples of successes using this method. By using s278 agreements, it could be ensured that roads, cycle paths, and footpaths were ready for use as soon as a housing development was finished. This meant residents could see immediate value for money and improvement.

Using s278 agreements was acknowledged as a workable solution for some projects. It was a method that had been used in the past, but it had not always been practical with developers. However, s278 agreements had been built into the moneys "held/secured" graph of the PowerPoint under 'other', along with bonds, totalling roughly £7.5m received in 2022/23.

- The Committee expressed concerns about the lack of urgency in s106 moneys being spent, and their fears of moneys being lost having not been spent. The Committee hoped to impress upon Cabinet that the issue of s106 contributions continued to arise because of this seeming lack of urgency from the Council.

The Committee was advised that a balance had to be found between spending moneys on infrastructure immediately and holding moneys for other infrastructure projects. Too many roads infrastructure works at once would have a negative effect on the efficiency of roads they intended to help. However, the importance of this issue had not been lost on the officers. The creation of the dashboard was seen as a positive first step, which would alleviate fears of moneys being forgotten, ignored, or lost.

The Committee was advised that the dashboard would be launched within the next few months. Feedback following demonstrations at the following round of locality meetings would be taken on board and the Council was committed to the dashboard launching by the autumn.

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** recommendations to Cabinet under the following headings:

- That the Council should ensure that the conditions attached to future s106 contributions are sufficiently flexible to ensure that they can be used to meet the actual needs of residents whilst ensuring that flexibility does not enable them to be spent in differing localities.
- That the Cabinet should accept and acknowledge the frustrations and dismay of members and residents at the sheer scale of the funding received and yet to be spent and should commit to that money being

used for the infrastructure projects for which it has been provided as speedily as practicable.

- That the Council should explore whether it would be better to enter s278 agreements which could ensure that physical infrastructure is provided by developers at the early stages of development rather than relying on s106 contributions being earmarked for such infrastructure at a later date.
- That the Council should ensure that information makes clear where unspent moneys have already been earmarked for future expenditure.
- That the Council should ensure that local members are informed about, involved in, and engaged with regarding any and all new developments from the beginning of proposals being discussed.
- That the Council should explore whether it would be appropriate for Cabinet members to sit on the Strategic Capital Board to ensure democratic responsibility.
- That the Council should, when its dashboard goes live, ensure that contact details for appropriate officers are attached to each infrastructure project.
- That the Council should avoid silo working and consider whether each Locality should have a s106 officer attached to it.

14/24 ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda Item 7)

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the action and recommendation tracker.

15/24 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda Item 8)

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** the proposed forward work plan, having taken account of the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Budget Management Monitoring Report subject to the following amendments:

- A potential report on mobility hubs, to be explored by the Scrutiny Officer
- To request the issue of public health be included within the forthcoming report on flooding.

16/24 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda Item 9)

The Committee resolved to **NOTE** the Cabinet response to its report on Vision Zero.

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Date of signing

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