

Divisions Affected - All

CABINET

15 November 2022

STATEMENT OF INTENT

Oxfordshire Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement

Report by Corporate Director Environment & Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) Agree this Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement to ensure environmental considerations are placed at the heart of policy and decision-making across the County Council.
- b) Re-affirm commitment to the shared environment principles of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, set out in Appendix 1.
- c) Lead positive change through a new County-wide strategic framework, detailed in Appendix 2, to ensure the principles for climate action, environmental resilience and nature recovery are embedded in the breadth of County Council partnership activity across Oxfordshire.

Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Council's Corporate Plan is ambitious for leading positive change by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier County. This new Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement (the Policy Statement) supports and strengthens this ambition to include a policy focus on environmental resilience and nature recovery.
- 2.2 Action to address the climate emergency is well established within the County Council's Climate Action Framework and this work is broadening to include an urgent focus on adapting to climate change as well as mitigation through carbon reduction.
- 2.3 The need for a renewed focus on the natural environment is driven by the Environment Act (2021) which provides a new legislative context for County Council plans, policies and activity.
- 2.4 Upon adoption, the next step will be to shape a new Strategic Framework for Oxfordshire with commonly agreed spatial and thematic strategies, integrated plans, projects and timescales to guide and inform decision-making to deliver the Oxfordshire vision. This approach ensures

that nature and the environment as well as climate action are proactively designed into the policy-making process.

Background

- 3.1 The County Council acknowledged the Climate Emergency in 2019 and set out the County Council's Climate Action Framework in 2020 which is now well established. A key deliverable within the Climate Action Framework is the Pathways to Zero Carbon Oxfordshire report, which the County Council is leading on through the Environment Advisory Group. The County Council has a strong commitment to partnership working in this regard, not least through the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, the Environment Advisory Group, Infrastructure Advisory Group and Housing Advisory Group, the development of the Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire and the Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership.
- 3.2 The County Council resolved in March 2021 to support the environment principles of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc¹ (Appendix 1) and led the shared commitment to these principles through the Future Oxfordshire Partnership. A key focus of this work was through the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. Unfortunately, the commitment to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan for Oxfordshire was abandoned by the Districts in August 2022. The only remaining strategy with a commitment from the Districts and the City Council to take this forward is through the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy.
- 3.3 The legislative framework for environmental resilience and renewal has been strengthened since the report last year to Cabinet (March 2021). The Environment Act (2021) was introduced later that year, which includes five principles to guide and support consistent decision-making and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was revised in 2021. The NPPF requires the planning system to:
- support the transition to a low carbon future,
 - shape places in ways that conserve and restore nature,
 - protect and enhance valued landscapes and sites of biodiversity to secure measurable net gain,
 - improve resilience to climate change including through green infrastructure, trees and woodland,
 - support renewable and low carbon energy developments.

National Environment Principles

- 4.1 The Government introduced environmental principles in the Environment Act (2021) and prepared a draft national environmental principles Policy Statement in May 2022 as a statutory document to improve policy-making across Government for environmental protection and sustainable development, as required by section 17(4) of the Environment Act. The UK

¹ Environment Working Group, Oxford – Cambridge Arc Leadership Group. *Shared regional principles for protecting, restoring and enhancing the environment in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc*. March 2021. [Ox-Cam Arc Environmental Principles](#)

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Government has already committed to the 5 principles in the national policy statement, set out below, through international instruments and processes.

- **the integration principle** - proposes that policy-makers should look for opportunities to embed environmental protection in fields of policy that have environmental effects.
- **the prevention principle** - means that government policy should aim to prevent environmental harm. This principle underpins many aspects of environmental policy to ensure that environmental damage, such as carbon emissions, pollution or biodiversity loss is avoided.
- **the rectification at source principle** - states that environmental damage should, as a priority, be addressed at its origin to avoid the need to remedy its effects later. Rectification at source should result in approaches that are more cost-effective, efficient, and equitable in the long-term.
- **the polluter pays principle** - where possible, the costs of pollution should be borne by those causing it, rather than the person who suffers the effects of the resulting environmental damage, or the wider community.
- **the precautionary principle** - assists the decision-making process in the face of a lack of scientific certainty. The principle helps policy-makers deal with risks which may not be precisely calculable in advance.

4.2 These principles provide a national policy framework for decision-making and a strategic context for the Oxfordshire environment principles outlined below.

Oxfordshire Environmental Principles

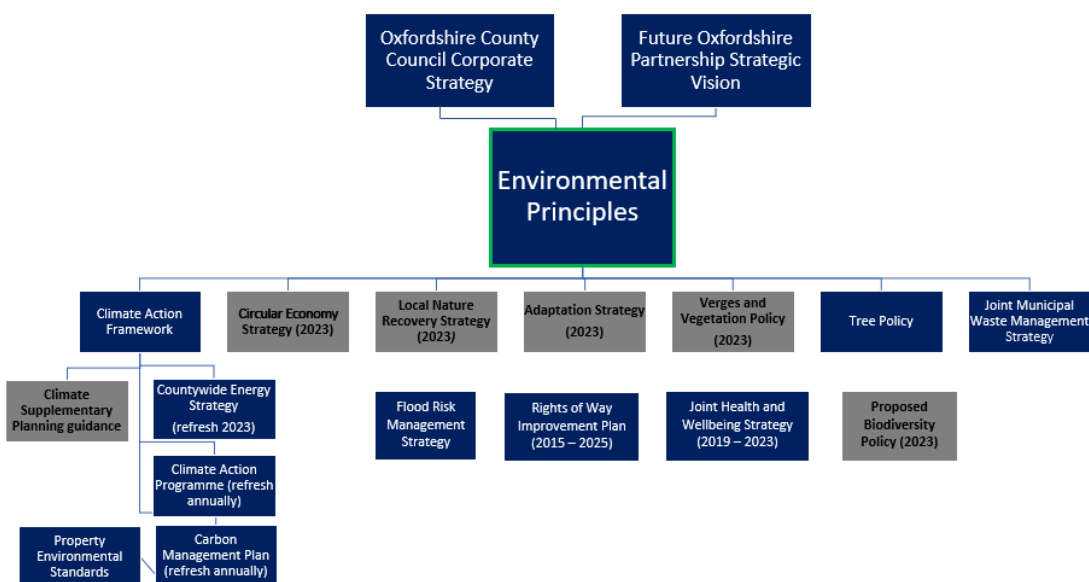
- 5.1 These environmental principles were first produced by the Environment Working Group of the Oxford - Cambridge Arc Leadership Group in 2020 (published in March 2021) and align with the government's 25 Year Environment Plan. Oxfordshire County Council agreed to endorse the Arc environmental principles in March 2021 and endorsement from the Future Oxfordshire Partnership to the principles followed later that year.
- 5.2 The environmental principles are intended to inform the emerging spatial frameworks within the Oxford to Cambridge Arc and within Oxfordshire, primarily through the then emerging Oxfordshire Plan 2050. These principles will default to the Local Plan frameworks but now without an overarching spatial and thematic policy framework for Oxfordshire. The original intention was to channel DEFRA (Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs) funding through pilot projects aligned to the emerging Environment Act in order for DEFRA to test and apply its 25 Year Environment Plan within the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. There may still be an appetite within DEFRA to take this work forward with Oxfordshire. Meanwhile the environmental principles underpin the Future Oxfordshire Vision, a shared commitment with the County Council, City and District authorities.
- 5.3 The principles have been reviewed and re-framed where appropriate to be specifically relevant to Oxfordshire and are presented in Appendix 2. They can be grouped according to seven strategic objectives, listed as follows:
1. Bring Oxfordshire to net zero carbon as early as possible in the 2040s

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2. Adapt to the challenges of climate change
3. Protect, restore, enhance and create new nature areas and natural capital assets
4. Use natural resources sustainably
5. Be an exemplar for environmental sustainable development
6. Ensure that existing and new communities see real benefits from our approach
7. Resource our ambitions, monitor and review regularly

Significance of this Oxfordshire Policy Statement

- 6.1 There has been considerable progress in County Council policy and activity since the environment principles were endorsed in 2021. However, the County Council recognises that the urgency for a renewed policy focus on the natural environment and our commitment to addressing the impacts of climate change is becoming more pressing. This Policy Statement is needed to strengthen policy, align strategy and inform decision-making to shape a systematic framework alongside the Climate Action Framework for urgent action on nature recovery, resource efficiency and renewal that complements delivery of the Corporate Plan outcomes, reduces inequality and promotes social, economic and environmental wellbeing across Oxfordshire.
- 6.2 To properly align decision-making the environmental principles will need to be supported by a suite of more specific strategies, policies and action plans. Work is already underway to identify where additional support is needed as illustrated below, blue boxes indicate existing documents, grey indicates proposed:



- 6.3 Integrated spatial frameworks are needed to inform decision-making and guide investment towards the delivery of place-based through the planning system. The environment principles were originally intended to shape spatial strategies and plans, including the Oxford-Cambridge

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Arc and the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. Given the changing context for these spatial frameworks there is an opportunity to give these environment principles a new focus. Appendix 2 sets out an indicative programme of strategic objectives and high-level headline deliverables to take the environment principles forward. Key stakeholders are identified against the core objectives however these lists are only indicative, not exhaustive and there will be significant overlap in areas of interest. A new strategy is needed to develop the focus of this programme both internally and externally to the County Council in order to demonstrate delivery against these shared environment principles across Oxfordshire, and to support the involvement of local people and communities in delivering positive environmental outcomes.

Next Steps

- 7.1 A new environment strategy and delivery framework is needed to ensure these environment principles underpin County Council decision making, this will be a significant next step of this Policy Statement. A focus on strategic policy alignment is needed across the County, to inform and influence Local Plans. A baseline State of the Environment report is needed to review and evaluate strategy, monitor and report on progress. The County Council will lead this process through a county-wide partnership approach.
- 7.2 A county wide strategic framework underpinned by relevant policies, technical evidence, spatial and thematic strategies is needed to support the timely preparation of Local Plans; this Policy Statement gives a County Council commitment to lead the preparation of such a framework. Ongoing work on the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy is needed as well as a focus on the emerging Oxfordshire Local Plans including the County's Minerals and Waste Local Plan. This Policy Statement will inform policy development for statutory and non-statutory strategies and align spatial and thematic decision-making frameworks including the Flood Risk Management Strategy, Circular Economy Strategy, Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and the area-based plans of the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan.
- 7.3 The delivery of this Policy Statement will be led through the County Council's Environment and Circular Economy Service and will inform the current service review priorities and allocation of resources. The Environment and Circular Economy Service is part of the Environment & Place directorate service transformation and restructure, this is ongoing and expected to be complete in March 2023. It is likely that the strategy will take 12-18 months to complete, meanwhile the County Council continue to use its influence to comment on statutory and non-statutory consultations, including the emerging Local Plans and proposed Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects.
- 7.4 Upon agreement of this Policy Statement the County Council will use its strategic leadership role, championing and influencing decision-making to engage the community, key stakeholders and partners in the delivery of an action plan. The County Council will continue to work in partnership and use its influence within the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and Oxford to Cambridge Arc to champion these environment principles and ensure delivery against them.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

- 8.1 This proposal supports all the nine priorities set out in the Corporate Plan and gives particular emphasis to the following strategic priorities:

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1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work
2. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire
3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
5. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network
6. Improve access to nature and green spaces
8. Play our part in a vibrant local democracy
9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

Financial Implications

- 9.1 The ambitions in this paper represent a step change in the pace and scale of service activity, including additional investment in projects and programmes. The financial implications are yet to be profiled and will involve negotiation and shared financial commitment with key stakeholders including the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and central government. Further detail on financial implications will be developed through the strategies and action plans, both existing and proposed, that will deliver the objectives of the environmental principles.

Comments checked by: Emma Percival, Management Accountant,
emma.percival@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 10.1. The delivery of some elements of the Oxfordshire Environmental Principles are covered by legislation including but not limited to The Environment Act 2021, The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Aspects of the Environment Act 2021, when enabled, will bring new responsibilities for the County Council on delivering and maintaining biodiversity net gain, as well as the monitoring and reporting on delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- 10.2 Policies can be broadly understood as an intended course of action adopted to achieve an objective. This Policy Statement therefore sets out a range of intended high-level actions to guide the development and delivery of statutory and non-statutory services to achieve the Core Objectives. This Policy Statement should be read alongside other relevant policy documents, including statutory documents and national policies.
- 10.3 In the context of the national policy statement, references to the environment mean the natural environment. As defined in section 44 of the Environment Act, the natural environment means:
- a) plants, wild animals and other living organisms
 - b) their habitats
 - c) land (except buildings or other structures), air and water

and the natural systems, cycles and processes through which they interact.

Comments checked by: Jennifer Crouch, Principal Solicitor Environmental Transformation,
jennifer.crouch@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

- 11.1 Environment and Place is currently undergoing a restructure expecting to last another 6 months creating some draw on capacity and a lead time on bringing in new staff and deliver the new policies identified as well as staff time across the council to then embed and deliver against those policies.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

- 12.1 Detailed consideration of the equality and inclusion implications will be undertaken as part of the development of the policies, strategies and plans that follow-on from the Policy Statement.

Sustainability Implications

- 13.1 The proposals seek to improve the long-term environmental sustainability of outcomes from the Council's actions.

Risk Management

- 14.1 At this stage the proposals are very high-level and build upon the existing OxCam Arc Environmental Principles which were endorsed by Cabinet in 2021. The main risks in their delivery are:
- Partnership work is key to delivery. Following the cessation of OP2050 there is a need to establish the appetite and mechanism for joint working particularly associated with planning policy.
 - Elements of government policy on the environment are currently unclear – a number of environmental delivery mechanisms are being delayed e.g. Environmental Land Management Scheme and we are awaiting guidance on other elements such as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Lack of clear central government policy and support will make it very difficult to deliver outcomes locally.
 - Implications for our estate are not yet known.
 - Environment and Place is currently going through a restructure expecting to last another 6 months creating some draw on capacity and a lead time on bringing in new staff.

Bill Cotton, Corporate Director Environment & Place

November 2020

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Annex: Appendix 1 – OxCam Arc Environmental Principles
Appendix 2 – Oxfordshire Environmental Principles

Background papers: Not applicable

[Other Documents:] Not applicable

Contact Officers: Nick Mottram, Acting Environment and Heritage Group Manager, Tel 0773002171, nick.mottram@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Sarah Gilbert, Head of Climate Change, Tel. 07867467797 Email sarah.gilbert@oxfordshire.gov.uk