

Annex B – barriers to efficiency

Productivity Plan for 2024/25 to 2026/27

Annual Local Government Finance Settlement – we have an excellent track record of delivering savings and balancing budgets in Oxfordshire however ambitions for investment in longer term solutions and strategic planning are hindered by the uncertainty of single year financial settlements. Predictable funding through multi-year settlements and a long term view on council tax referendum limits would be a welcome advantage in better preparedness for the future needs of Oxfordshire.

Competitive bidding for funding – The council has to spend time and resources to prepare bids for additional funding from central government or other sources, which often have complex criteria and short deadlines. This creates a competitive culture across local councils that distracts from core service delivery and strategic planning. Longer lead in time for funding opportunities and simplified criteria, which is consistent across all central government departments, would enable a more efficient approach to accessing funding.

This consistency is also welcomed in a policy space, with inefficiency often a result of inconsistent policy from various departments, such as introduction of new regulations without proper consultation with local authorities, which leads to diverting of resources that may not align with local need or existing government strategies. We need more consistency, integration, and a longer-term outlook from central government and a coherency across departments with more recognition of the role and potential of local government in shaping and delivering policies.

Devolution – The Council submitted an expression of interest in a Level 2 county devolution deal in December 2023, with support of our City and District Councils and the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, our strategic partnership board. Oxfordshire as a system has an ambitious agenda for inclusivity, sustainability and strategic and community infrastructure. We have solid examples, including our green finance initiative, where innovative local approaches could contribute to national and international social, environmental and economic goals. At this time our expression of interest has not been taken forward by DLUHC and we would welcome the opportunity for further discussions. Beyond the current level 2 framework, we are developing high impact proposals, for examples for long-term alternative finance to accelerate delivery and enhance productivity. However, making the most of these opportunities would require government to engage in a more open and flexible way, beyond the simple delegations set out in the current framework.

Home to school transport – the unit costs of providing home to school transport continues to increase steeply, for both mainstream and children with SEN. In Oxfordshire this costs £34m per annum, with the most significant area of growth in providing home to school transport for children with SEND. The home to school transport service in OCC is restricted to the statutory minimum duty. Guaranteed additional funding to support meeting the growth in demand would enable us to allocate resources to ensure we meet the service requirements and be better placed to maintain other vital services that support children, families and schools. However, if central government funding cannot

be increased, then a change in the legislation that requires local authorities to provide home to school transport for free to eligible children, will allow local authorities to introduce changes in eligibility criteria and charging in the system (through a means tested approach) for school age children. This would create a more effective and targeted service that is more affordable.

Social Care reform – an aging population has seen the demand for adult social care continue to grow, with the number of 65+ predicted to increase by 21% in Oxfordshire by 2031. In addition, we have seen an increase in the number of younger adults with disabilities, which now account for nearly 50% of our spend on Adult Social Care, and increasing numbers of children with disabilities who will need support in adulthood, this increased demand on social care will grow further. Clarification around the proposed reforms, especially charging reforms, and certainty around funding would enable us to better prepare for the growing need without negatively impacting on other, vital services including provision of preventative services that will reduce demand on social care services.

Resources and Waste Strategy – we are unable to plan accordingly for the significant changes set out in the Resources and Waste Strategy and other proposed legislation due to the continued delays and lack of detail. Information on the interactions between policies, potential income and obligations for Oxfordshire will be welcomed as soon as reasonably possible to enable us to plan for this provision in the long term and identify strategic opportunities to further enhance our high performing waste management service provision.

Recruitment and retention – we face a challenge in attracting and retaining diverse and high-quality staff, particularly in relation to social care. Oxfordshire not only has to compete with other councils, within the travel to work geography, but also deliver our statutory responsibilities to the independent care sector relating to workforce. The social care sector as a whole is competing with other private and commercial industries, including retail, who are often able to provide candidates with better pay and benefits. This, coupled with skills shortage across specialised roles means it's increasingly difficult to attract qualified staff, which we have experienced as a pressure in qualified social work, therapies and safeguarding. Oxfordshire has purposefully sustained a fair level of fees that we pay in the context of Fair Cost of Care (higher than most other councils) so the overall funding to Adult Social Care is really important as a means of protecting market sustainability.

The issues in recruitment are cross-organisational. Oxfordshire has an older workforce and a shortage of younger workers which means various roles across council services are difficult to fill. Central government support of the LGA's national recruitment campaign will be welcomed in boosting the profile and accessibility of working in the public sector and support for agile working will help us appeal to stronger candidates without geography being a barrier for interest in our appropriate vacant positions.