

To: Oxfordshire Growth Board

Title of Report: Growth Board Review: Consultation Summary and Initial Findings

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Status: Public

Executive Summary

This report sets out the results of the consultation undertaken as part of the review of the Growth Board's role and functions, together with initial findings and recommendations for the Board's consideration.

The Board and its predecessors have played a pivotal role in bringing local authorities, major institutions, business and Government departments and agencies together to collaborate on planning for, and managing the impacts of, growth. Having an established board which discusses growth related subjects was also key in helping Oxfordshire secure not only the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal, but also two Housing & Infrastructure Fund bids providing funds for vital infrastructure in excess of £500m.

The extensive engagement undertaken confirms the value of having such a collaboration, whilst helping identify where we can build on our success and improve how the Board works.

The Board has evolved over time to ensure it is fit for purpose and will continue to evolve. Major shifts in national priorities such as climate change will make the need for collaboration even greater.

Reflecting on the experience and feedback from Board members, their organisations, key stakeholders and the wider community, a set of recommendations for short term improvements and longer-term development are included in this report for the Growth Board's consideration.

If agreed, the changes will be implemented over the coming year and will result in updated terms of reference being produced.

Purpose of the Report:

1. This report sets out the results of the consultation undertaken as part of the review of the Growth Board’s role and functions, together with initial findings and recommendations for the Board’s consideration.

Recommendations:

That the Growth Board:

- 1) Notes the results of the consultation at Annex 1 which have been fundamental in shaping the detailed recommendations to take forward;
- 2) Instructs the Growth Board Director and Manager, with the support of the Board’s Executive Officer Group, to develop detailed draft Terms of Reference for the Board which incorporate the key initial changes set out in this report between paragraphs 25 and 41 and return those for endorsement by June 2020;
- 3) Instructs the Growth Board Director and Manager, with the support of the Board’s Executive Officer Group, to further develop the proposals from paragraph 42 to 55 and report back further suggested improvements by Autumn 2020.

Introduction and background

2. The Oxfordshire Growth Board (‘the Board’) was established in 2014 as a Joint Committee¹ of the six councils of Oxfordshire (‘the partner authorities’), together with key strategic partners. It was set up to facilitate and enable joint working on matters concerning economic development, strategic planning and growth. The Board’s establishment was premised on strengthening partnership arrangements across Oxfordshire for pragmatic working on key strategic issues. It has successfully done this by overseeing the delivery of cross-county projects that the councils of Oxfordshire were seeking to deliver in a collaborative way – between local authorities, the Local Enterprise Partnership and wider partners and stakeholders.²
3. On 24 September 2019, the Board agreed to carry out a formal review of its role and function to ensure that the most pragmatic and effective arrangements are in place to enable collaboration and delivery on Oxfordshire wide priorities. The review was also tasked with reflecting on some of the administrative and communication challenges that have been apparent in the Board’s work. This has meant reflecting on how the Board has operated to date and whether its structures and processes remain fit for the future.
4. This review welcomed the views of the public, partners and councillors through several engagement exercises involving members of the public, councillors, officers and other stakeholders. This report provides a summary of the consultation responses received, together with recommendations for implementation in two parts: Part 1 sets out improvements from paragraph 25 to 41 which we can initiate over the coming few months which will see a sharper

¹ under s101 (5), 102 Local Government Act 1972 (LGA 1972) and s9EB Local Government Act 2000 (LGA 2000) and pursuant to the Local Authorities (Arrangement for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2012.

² As a Joint Committee, the Board may discharge executive functions, but each constituent authority retains the ability to exercise all executive and non-executive functions generally and specifically in relation to economic development including where applicable provision of housing, strategic spatial planning and strategic transport planning.

focus of the Growth Board on its core functions related to its core purpose in planning for and managing strategic and sustainable growth and supporting infrastructure.

5. Part 2 proposes that the Board agrees the exploration of further opportunities for improvement as set out in the report from paragraphs 42 to 55 and reported back to a future Board meeting to be considered for implementation. This will involve working closely with all existing members and additional partners from other major boards in the County. and would be something to explore and develop further in 2020.
6. Some of the key recommendations in this report, if supported, will require further developmental work to be undertaken. Support for any such recommendations will not be agreed until formal proposals have been received and agreed through the relevant decision-making structures.

Engagement and Feedback

7. The formal engagement activity for the review concluded in December 2019. The following activities have been undertaken through the review process:
 - A workshop with the Growth Board
 - Interviews with board members, in addition to informal discussions
 - Several developmental discussions with the Executive Officers Group
 - A public survey receiving 247 responses
 - Three workshops, engaging with councillors and members of the public
 - An informal discussion with the Scrutiny Panel Chair and Vice-Chair
 - Formal submissions from Scrutiny Panel members and local groups
 - Meetings with the Oxfordshire Monitoring Officers group
8. A summary of the consultation feedback can be found at Appendix 1. These highlight some key areas for improvement. The main messages received can be summarised as follows:
 - a) Collaboration between Local Authorities and major strategic stakeholders is of value and has been helpful and necessary to deliver joint working on matters of strategic importance;
 - b) There needs to be more effective communication with councillors, partners and the public about what the Growth Board is and what, if any, decisions it takes. Ambiguity on this front has led to a series of detrimental misunderstandings.
 - c) There needs to be greater consideration of environmental issues through appropriate structures (for example, membership, experts and work-streams);
 - d) There should be widespread public and stakeholder engagement (not just communication) in any vision setting for the county;
 - e) The Growth Board has a function (to collaborate) but it appears not to have aims or a vision – this is often assumed to be growth for growth's sake;

- f) The Growth Board's current strategic coordination function is uniquely important for representing Oxfordshire's joint interests and co-leadership, but it must remain flexible enough to meet future opportunities from Government;
- g) The Growth Board is currently seen as a space for public engagement and also a strategic coordination group. Undertaking these two roles through one forum has been challenging, and would be best separated but remain informed by each another;
- h) Some viewed the group does not have democratic accountability and that some members of the Board (non-local authority) are perceived to have a conflict of interest.

Success and Opportunity

9. Throughout the review, many contributors maintained that it was important to have a joined-up partnership voice for Oxfordshire that seeks to address the challenges and opportunities for Oxfordshire in the future. This was often expressed as macro-level planning for increased service demand, demographic change and collective ambitions for the future, with a preference for consensus building (over decision making) on key strategic issues and demonstrating collective leadership and unity, whilst being shaped by the views of local people. This has been widely supported through the review by councillors, members of the public and other stakeholders. The Centre for Public Scrutiny sets out how a platform for joint working, such as the Growth Board, can bring benefit to each partner and the locality. It put systems in place to:
- Allow leaders to take the initiative, informed by a wide range of other people
 - Develop and analyse shared evidence
 - Manage debate and constructive dialogue
 - Prioritise effectively
 - Identify common interests
 - Share out responsibility for making improvements.³
10. This is not dissimilar to what the Growth Board has been seeking to achieve since it was established in 2014, though the review has shown that there are some challenges in executing this approach, such as communication and engagement. A review of recent work shows that, as the first partnership of its kind, the Growth Board has been pivotal and innovative in securing additional government investment for much needed infrastructure improvements in the County. It has been a template innovator which other regions have sought to emulate in their own partnerships. It has done this largely by drawing on the existing resources of each partner council and the LEP to position Oxfordshire as a place for much needed investment in a highly competitive national context.
11. Whilst there is some clear frustration about the mechanistic approach of the Growth Board meetings themselves, and communication and outreach has not been sufficient in effect, there is a view from some contributors that the Growth Board has significant value and that Oxfordshire has benefitted from, and

³ Centre for Public Scrutiny. 2014. Growth through good governance. Available at: <https://www.cfps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Growth-through-Good-Governance.pdf>

continues to need this form of, collaboration to bring the varied elements of Local Government and major stakeholders together. A key challenge for the Growth Board's physical meetings however has been in trying to provide this holistic and generalist coordination function, whilst also providing robust oversight of specific projects agreed by the Councils of Oxfordshire, such as the Housing and Growth Deal.

12. This cooperation between councils and partners has helped to share information, align and develop key strategic planning documents across Oxfordshire, and secure additional investment for the county, such as through the City Deal, Housing and Growth Deal, Housing Infrastructure Fund and the Oxfordshire Rail Connectivity Study. Over the years of close working on managing the impact of growth and infrastructure delivery, local councils have secured alongside their partners over £500m of investment, including the Housing and Growth Deal. In addition to the £215m provided by Central Government, The Deal has provided much needed planning flexibilities for local planning authorities, such as through a reducing the 5-year housing land supply requirement to 3 years as we develop the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. This has all been achieved against a backdrop of financial austerity over the last decade.
13. The Board has provided a public space through which collective representations can be made to regional and national bodies, such as England's Economic Heartland and Homes England. The Board has also provided a clearer and stronger local voice to Government strengthening our ability to be heard and to be a credible partner of Government. Feedback from partners has also showed support for the work to date, in that the Board provides space for information sharing and cross-service thinking about planning for Oxfordshire's future.

Ways to Improve

14. The review feedback demonstrated that many people believe that regularised decisions are taken by the Growth Board on behalf of local councils on a range of issues, which are in fact outside of the Board's remit, but nonetheless came under criticism. For example, many believed that the Growth Board has a role in deciding housing site allocations. This is not the case. Subsequent engagement with the review however seems to have been based around this misunderstanding. In almost all criticisms that were received of the Growth Board, the origin could be traced back to a cause of ineffective communications. Accordingly, the need for improved communication is perhaps the most significant issue that needs addressing. Historically, significant energy has been expended trying to retrospectively explain as much what we have not done as what we have.
15. There is a clear view that the public need to be better engaged but that there also needs to be room and space for Local Authority leaders and other system leads to meet and discuss their council's agendas – not only to see where there is common ambition and ground, but as regards the Growth Board specifically, to better understand how it needs to respond to this ambition in the future.
16. The negative connotations of the word 'growth' in the Board's title were also considered by many to be problematic, and an accelerant to misunderstandings about the Board's role. Accordingly, many believe the Board's overriding priority is growth for growth's sake, above or ignorant to environmental, social or other

needs. Stating, or reforming its purpose would go a significant way to providing clarity to all. The engagement work has shown that the issues and concerns of the majority are with how the Board operates and communicates, more than whether or not local councils should be collaborating with each other and their partners. Accordingly, the consultation has offered support for the continuation of a clear collaborative platform for Oxfordshire which can evidence joined up thinking and working, whilst also securing much-needed Government investment in key infrastructure projects.

17. In many ways the Growth Board has been a trailblazer in local authority collaboration and has secured success from this collaboration (meeting the statutory Duty to Cooperate, providing a sound evidence base for defending Local Plans) where others have failed to do so. Its purpose and perhaps its name and priorities would benefit from being more closely aligned to what it legitimately seeks but does not always do well to communicate – sustainable growth for the whole of Oxfordshire through partnership. Improved communication and messaging will be fundamental to improved operations in future.
18. Feedback and observation show that we do not take advantage of our key relationships and that more informal discussion about what major organisations and institutions are doing and planning would be helpful to inform longer-term planning across all partners. Many feel this informal approach of information gathering and consensus building could achieve more than we do through the formality of the Board itself. It has been suggested that the Board explores more effective ways of including and engaging system leaders and subject experts in discussions and forward planning so that when we do have open public meetings, these are more rounded in their content and potentially more inclusive of the wider stakeholder community.
19. In terms of the mechanics of the Growth Board itself, this is where there is a lot of general frustration from members and non-members alike. Many have said the Board meeting itself is not as effective as it could be and lacks effective engagement between members and with the public. For interested stakeholders, it is at best confusing; at worst, they feel this is a pre-determined arrangement fronting what really gets decided elsewhere and a place where their voice is not heard.
20. While there has been some level of public disquiet about access to the work of the Board, this concern has increased significantly since the Housing and Growth Deal was agreed by constituent partners in 2018. This disquiet is also amongst some councillors across the county who feel they do not know enough about what is happening. The Sub-groups and Scrutiny Panel were attempts to create a more inclusive arrangement for consensus building and we heard some positive feedback about this and in particular, how there is a need to bring together cross-party and cross-county representation across our workstreams. Indeed, the sub groups and Scrutiny Panel offer 36 additional seats for locally elected councillors to be involved in the process. There were also calls for more routine briefings and engagement to and within each of the councils.
21. There is however some concern that a large scrutiny function has been created with very few decisions to review. Whilst it has been set up in a similar way to other local government scrutiny functions, it does not have the same frequency of

decisions to review, in line with the Growth Boards' limited powers. The Panel has already given the Board key recommendations to help improve its processes, performance and operations, but there has been limited opportunity to influence the Housing and Growth Deal Programme, for example, because regular decisions are not required. The Panel is subsequently providing oversight of a Board that principally provides oversight itself.

22. There was a majority of feeling, particularly from the public, that the Board needs to pay more attention to the environment and in particular, ensure that our ambitions are set within the context of committed climate change actions as they emerge. The vast majority of respondents do not like the name of the Board, particularly the negative connotation that follows the term "growth". But they also feel it is not accurate to call it a board, which implies it is where decisions are taken. There have been many suggestions, but generally there is a will for this body to be positive, forward looking and thinking – something which references the future and facilitates the collective ambition of partners and the public.
23. As for democratic accountability – it is true that wherever statutory decisions are to be taken, they are taken through proper procedures within each council and it is also true the only votes within the Board itself rest with the locally elected leaders who sit on the Board. There was however a clear feeling that while it may take limited decisions directly, it may have an influence on decisions to be taken and in some respects, should be capable of leading our approach to our shared vision and ambition.
24. Pragmatically it still should be designed in such a flexible way that if changes regionally or nationally emerge, that it is capable of taking decisions, should the individual councils wish it to do so. Those decisions would benefit significantly through more open forward planning and communication. There continues to be greater opportunity through a collective voice to promote our issues and possible solutions with Government and other existing and emerging regional bodies.

Part 1: Recommended Short Term Improvements

A Restatement of Purpose

25. There appears to be merit in clarifying the Growth Board's functions for the purposes of role clarity and business expedience. Focussing the Growth Board's Terms of Reference and membership to create a purpose-built forum for oversight and monitoring for strategic planning, managing growth and major infrastructure projects can bring clarity to the process and clearly demonstrate to the public its democratic accountability. This does not suggest that wider issues cannot be explored through the Board (e.g. climate change) specifically where the subject matter has a demonstrable impact on future planning for the county.
26. The review has shown that the Board should focus specifically on: strategic planning; performance and financial management of the Housing & Growth Deal and any successors; and, collaboration on joint funding bids to central government as they relate to longer term planning and infrastructure needed to deliver sustainable development in Oxfordshire. Any formal agreement being sought relating to statutory local government matters will still be left to the leaders of the

councils and where necessary their constituent councils. As for all other matters related to the Board, the will and views of the Board as a whole will be sought. No member will be able to bind another to policy, contracts or expenditure unless such powers have been delegated to this partnership.

27. It is suggested this group meets quarterly in public to ensure it is progressing and monitoring the business of its forward plan. This will allow more effective quarterly performance monitoring process to take place, which the current six meetings each year does not favour. In this way we can be very clear about what it does, when it meets, how the public can see the work it is doing and to engage as necessary on the elements of public interest.
28. In this context, it is recommended the Growth Board adopt a statement of common purpose for its work, which will add to the public understanding of its role. Without the need for additional powers, the Growth Board's common purpose should be articulated as follows:

The growing local economy will create challenges and opportunities for Oxfordshire related to housing, infrastructure, public services and the environment. These issues will best be addressed through joined up planning between local councils which prioritises sustainable development and quality of life. Collective planning where it makes sense to do so will be the most effective means of minimising the unwanted impacts of a growing economy, whilst leveraging the maximum benefit from the opportunities it brings for our existing and future communities.

The Growth Board will:

- a) *Coordinate local efforts to manage economic, housing and infrastructure development in a way that is inclusive and maximises local social and environmental benefits;*
 - b) *Support the development of local planning policy that moves towards zero carbon and carbon positive development, and contributes to biodiversity gain, embracing the changes needed for a low carbon world; and,*
 - c) *Coordinate local efforts to secure funding in the pursuit of these aims.*
29. This purpose should be clearly stated in the Board's communication channels, for example through the Growth Board's website, a statement on openness and transparency, and eventually the terms of reference. This would provide a more refined steer to inform the Board's forward plan. A restatement of purpose could be supported over the short term by a series of engagements designed to reset the narrative about what the Board is and what it does. This work need to form part of an agreed Communications Strategy supporting the Board's work.
30. While many comments were received about the name, we also heard support for retaining the name as it has an established identity and has gained support and legitimacy nationally. While we are seeking to improve how we work, the model we use here is an innovative and unique approach others are seeking to replicate, supported by Government as being necessary to help manage sustainable growth in future. It is recommended that any review of the name of the Board be considered as part of the work to develop the vision and purpose of the Board moving forward.

31. On a more minor level, meetings of the Growth Board would benefit from the Chair introducing each meeting setting out the role of the Board and business of the meeting so that there is clarity in the business to be transacted.

Scrutiny

32. The Scrutiny Panel currently has a role in overseeing the decisions and actions taken by the Growth Board. In practice, it has had almost no formal decisions to scrutinise. The premise of its role is crucial for the Housing and Growth Deal in providing cross-party scrutiny for a significant joint programme, and any other joint programmes that are overseen. However, the nature of Growth Board meetings has left limited opportunity for scrutiny (in the conventional local government way) to take place.
33. A more effective construct for scrutinising partnership matters, including the Growth Board, could be a corresponding group constituted of one Overview and Scrutiny Chair from each authority, potentially along with one further member from each authority, forming the Growth Board Scrutiny Panel. Scrutiny Chairs are well networked in their councils, often with significant experience in their role. The creation of this panel could support a network and systematic approach to scrutiny across the county. It would also make clear who the relevant local authority scrutiny representatives are and promote the dissemination of information into local committees as required. This group could have a specific remit to check and challenge the Housing and Growth Deal.
34. It is recommended Growth Board officers working closely with the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel look at this approach to implement this change, as well as seek to investigate any longer-term development opportunities as identified in Part 2 below.

Environment

35. Bringing more environmental consideration to our work was a key theme arising from the engagement of members and the public. The Growth Board should recognise there are significant and diverse elements related to its purpose which by their nature cannot be identified through one voice such as the environment. However, there is merit in developing the idea of an Environment Working Group associated with the Growth Board. This will bring environmental issues, debate and discussion to inform and support the development and delivery of the Board's work programme, rather than as a consultee later. It will take time to develop this so related recommendations are identified under Part 2 of this report.

Work Planning

36. The Growth Board should hold an annual work planning event each June. This would aim to set a high-level agenda for the year and help to prioritise issues and allocate roles for undertaking such work. The Board could then take a view on what was core work for the Board and what work involved other partners and invite dialogue with those to develop the programme further. The work programme

would be finalised in the autumn to ensure resources and revenue implications were picked up in annual budget reviews as required.

Public Participation

37. Several respondents to the review said the public participation procedures are not satisfactory and serve to create divisions between the Board and the Public, and that there needs to be a more effective way of engaging the public and channelling their input. While we should improve the practice of public participation at meetings (inevitably these are and will be somewhat formulaic and regulated), there is an opportunity to be more innovative about creating more engagement with the public. Part 2 of this report sets out a new space in which this can happen, but there are minor changes that have been identified and recommended for the public participation procedures at meetings in the short term, as set out below:

- The Chair should direct questions to the most relevant person on the Board (rather than it always being the Chair) or indeed a Board member can seek support or assistance from professional officers in attendance;
- Any written responses to questions will be published on the Board's website;
- Notice for questions and statements from the public should be aligned to have the same deadline: 3 clear working days before meetings. This is currently three and one respectively. This allows for the fact that addresses often require a response, but provide limited time for a response to be prepared;
- More active engagement between Board members and the public speaker would be welcome;
- Supplementary questions should be allowed, dependent on time available, at the discretion of the Chair.

Executive Officer Group

38. There is confusion over the role of the Executive Officers Group (EOG), what it does and who should sit on it. The role, members and attendees of EOG should be clearly defined as they will effectively help to steer and manage the overall work programme. As effectively the Operational Board of the Growth Board, EOG members should be active in informing and delivering the Forward Plan, the agenda for the Board and its content. They should also be present in support of the Board when it meets. A senior officer from each Local Authority, OxLEP and the Oxfordshire Environment Board should be active members of EOG.

39. Other officers from supporting Government agencies and departments, partners and stakeholders should also be invited to take part in this group. The Programme Board for the Housing and Growth Deal will be comprised of the Local Authority Executive Officers, a senior LEP officer and chaired by , the Director of the Growth Board with Homes England as observer.

Meetings Schedule

40. The short timeframe between Scrutiny Panel meetings and the Growth Board has been challenging. Officers recommend moving the Scrutiny Panel meetings from the Thursday before the Board to the Tuesday to allow more time for the Scrutiny Panel's report and recommendations to be developed. The publication date will

also be brought forward by a further two days to address criticisms of the time available to read reports. In practice, this has already started happening. A calendar for 2020/21 including Advisory Sub-group meetings has been drafted and the website updated with provisional dates.

Terms of Reference

41. Any substantive changes to the Growth Board's Terms of Reference will need to go back through each Council's Cabinet. Subject to agreement from the Growth Board at its meeting on 28 January 2020, the Director and Manager of the Growth Board, supported by EOG, will turn any agreed proposals for improvements into a formal set of terms of reference. The terms of reference will be presented back for agreement to proceed to local councils no later than June 2020. Subsequent agreement will be sought from Councils by September 2020. Any alterations to the terms of reference affecting the Housing and Growth Deal will need to be discussed with Central Government as the programme sponsor before any changes can take effect.

Part 2: Areas for Further Development

42. In addition to the short-term improvements identified above, there are several areas for further potential improvement which have been developed in response to the review. Focussing the Board on strategic planning and infrastructure with a clear remit for securing devolved funding to support our work still leaves space for wider and more strategic discussions between public service leads and the public on county-wide priorities which may be related to, but extend well beyond, a housing and infrastructure discussion; a space to discuss and develop joint programmes related to health, the environment and the economy, for example.

Oxfordshire Leadership Conference

43. This review has shown significant enthusiasm from partners and the public to be more involved in joint planning for the future of Oxfordshire. A public Oxfordshire-wide forum (for the purpose of this report referred to as Oxfordshire Leadership Conference) could take up this space. This could be established to provide a more effective space for public engagement and debate outside of any Growth Board or formal committee-type structure. This is not envisaged as having a committee or board approach but rather a more inclusive space for vision and strategy development and testing through an annual conference for example, with workshops, debates and exhibitions. It would provide a space for clear place-based civic leadership and debate (as shown conceptually to the right⁴) – and an opportunity for deeper and richer engagement



⁴ Hambleton and Sweeting, 2015. The Impacts of Mayoral Governance in Bristol.

on the most important strategic issues for Oxfordshire. This also supports general feedback concerning the need for greater democratisation and engagement in strategic thinking for the whole of the county.

44. This Oxfordshire-wide conference could, for example, focus specifically on collective planning for tackling climate change, and hosting expert and participant forums to inform the discussion. It would be the responsibility of all constituent partners to take actions from this however as a non-decision-making forum.
45. The Board is recommended to endorse further exploration of this concept with other community partnerships across the county. Proposals would be then brought back for the Board to agree later in 2020, but would only be delivered following agreement from each council
46. The Growth Board has run a risk of addressing too many issues to allow for detailed discussion. This is reflected through busy agendas, calls for a wider membership and more work streams. The creation of Oxfordshire Leadership Conference would allow bi-directional communication between it and a cross-section of existing partnership bodies – a network of networks - helping to inform, debate and identify ongoing shared areas of priority work.
47. For example, Oxfordshire Leadership Conference could recommend issues to the Health and Wellbeing Board to consider, and vice versa. The same could be said for the LEP, Oxfordshire Environment Board or the Growth Board. This is a strictly reciprocal and horizontal structure where work can be recommended to existing groups – not hierarchical in any way.

Vision and Ambition

48. Through the consultation, some of those engaged have asked for a vision to be developed setting out the Board's ambitions for Oxfordshire as a whole. We think this has merit and should be explored further as an extension of restating our purpose and as part of our improved approach to communication. This is something we could jointly explore with all of our members and through engaging other Boards in the county under the Oxfordshire Leadership Conference work.

Stand-alone environment body (e.g. Local Nature Partnership)

48. A significant volume of the responses concerned the Board's role in protecting the environment and addressing climate change. Many said this needed to be the Board's top priority. It is important that the Board acknowledges and welcomes this as a short-term message; however, developing a Working Group and a collaborative approach to the environment, and indeed to such a wide-ranging subject as climate change, will take time and should be inclusive of other voices across the county.
49. It is recommended that the Growth Board and its constituent Local Authorities work with the Oxfordshire Environment Board, the DEFRA family and other interested groups exploring the potential for stronger collaboration, including the opportunities that may be realised from establishing a Local Nature Partnership.

50. The key ambition here is to ensure that the environment, including natural capital, biodiversity, nature recovery and resilience and human interaction with greenspaces is placed at the heart of the Board's vision, purpose and actions. This will take some time to establish but it is recommended developing this as soon as possible.

Working Groups

51. Generally, there is support for the role the Sub-Groups are playing and there is no proposal to significantly alter this. These groups were set up to guide specific elements of the Housing & Growth Deal.

52. It is recommended that officers are tasked with exploring the idea of establishing 3 new thematic groups which would guide the Growth Board's overall agreed workplan. These are the emerging themes for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc and basically represent the three pillars of sustainability. These could be phased in and comprised potentially of a wider membership of councillors and system leaders in the subject matter. More work and discussion would be needed with partners through this process, but as a starter, we recommend developing the following thematic groups:

- Economy and Productivity
- Place Shaping and Social Inclusion
- Environment

Scrutiny – Further Improvements

53. It is recommended in addition to the short-term improvements noted previously, that opportunities for more effective use of the group and its time be explored involving the Panel. This may involve deeper dives into very specific issues related to the Housing & Growth Deal, for example. These more detailed pieces of work outside of the formal committee setting are often regarded as the most effective means of scrutiny by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, and the additional support can benefit the work of the Growth Board.

54. The option of attracting non-member involvement in the scrutiny function should also be investigated. This could be in the form of inviting specific technical advisers to participate where a topic warranted this, or indeed bring other perspectives to the table if it was considered appropriate to do so. Ensuring we have the resources available for this critical function is an area we recommend could use further review. It is recognised however that the Scrutiny Panel is still relatively new in its operation, and a wider discussion would be needed with its membership through this process.

55. Part of the reason for developing a large scrutiny panel was to find ways in which to involve more elected members in the work of the Board. This may not have been the most effective way to do this in hindsight, but the intention is a good one and it is recommended ways of gaining wider involvement and support from all elected members across the county are explored. This could be, for example, through very specific task and finish groups or through extended local scrutiny "deep dives" into specific subjects.

Timescales

- 56.** It is recommended that the Growth Board accepts the review's findings and agrees to implement the proposals in two stages: Part 1 being a set of improvements to the operation of the Growth Board implemented as soon as possible; Part 2 being to develop proposals to engage and explore a further set of improvements that would be best considered and shaped by a more inclusive group of participants across the Growth Board membership.
- 57.** Assuming agreement, officers will seek to get revised Terms of Reference for the Part 1 changes back to the Growth Board by June 2020 and seek agreement to these with each council as soon as possible but most aiming for Autumn 2020 (allowing for local elections to be completed and the time to run through local decision-making cycles).
- 58.** Following engagement and development of the Oxfordshire Leadership Conference proposals, along with the other Part 2 improvements, detailed proposals will be presented no later than September 2020 to the Growth Board and any other relevant body for views and support in principle, with subsequent approval and programme development sought from local authorities and partners by the end of 2020.
- 59.** It should be noted that the recommendations set out in this report are that of the report authors and not the Growth Board itself. Accordingly, it is expected that more discussions will be needed with each constituent member over the coming months to develop a consensus and support for the detailed next steps.

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