

Joint Audit and Governance Committee



Report of Deputy Chief Executive - Place
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Future Oxfordshire Partnership Refresh and Devolution

Recommendation(s)

(a) That the Joint Audit and Governance Committee note the proposed changes to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and wider devolution proposals and consider any implications that may impact South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council's ability to deliver effective governance.

Implications (further detail within the report)	Financial	Legal	Climate and Ecological	Equality and diversity
	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Signing off officer	Simon Hewings	Nick Bennett	Jessie Fieth	Mark Minion

Purpose of Report

1. On 27 June 2024 ([South](#)) and 28 June 2024 ([Vale](#)) at respective Cabinet meetings members considered a report on the Review of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP).

2. At those respective meetings, both Cabinets resolved “to consider the future remit of Future Oxfordshire Partnership, a statutory joint committee, and to seek engagement from all councillors on that remit in order to assist the Leader in representing the Council’s views.”
3. In order to seek the views of members it was proposed to share this paper with both the Joint Audit and Governance Committee as part of its role to consider corporate governance matters. It will also be considered with the Joint Scrutiny Committee to ensure that as many members have the opportunity to input to this review.

Strategic Objectives

4. Openness and accountability in South Oxfordshire.
5. Working in an open and inclusive way in the Vale of White Horse.

Background

6. Following the Cabinet papers considered in June 2024, the Leaders attended a “Summit” with other members of FOP on 29 July 2024 to consider the future of the partnership and how it might now be refreshed as the 2018 housing and growth deal comes to an end, and a new national Government is in place.
7. As a result of these discussions and ongoing discussions a paper has been produced setting out a position for endorsement at the FOP meeting on 26 November 2024. A copy of the paper is attached.
8. Devolution in England is the process whereby Government passes powers and in some cases funding, to individual local authorities or to groups of authorities which work together through “combined authorities”. In areas of England without existing devolution arrangements, the Government has announced an English Devolution Bill to offer devolved powers against a new framework, which it will publish in due course. Ahead of publishing that framework, the Government invited the Oxfordshire County Council, as an upper-tier authority, to engage via an expression of interest with MHCLG.
9. On 30 September 2024, Oxfordshire County Council submitted a response to Government following its request for expression of interest on devolved powers. The [letter](#) was jointly signed by all six Council Leaders in Oxfordshire. The letter set out the Leaders’ willingness to discuss devolution further with Government collectively.
10. The Government is expected to publish by the end of this year the English Devolution White Paper and Government has indicated their intention is for this to lead to universal coverage of Mayoral Combined Authorities at a sub-regional level. There are also proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), along with proposals for growth plans and focus on economic development.
11. In 2019 both South and Vale took respective formal Council decisions stating preference for smaller units of administrative geography (in the region of 300,000), that can demonstrate the ability to be more responsive to local need and yet still be financially efficient. However, it is anticipated as set out above the Government will be seeking much larger geographies for any Mayor Combined Authority based devolution and indeed in the Autumn Budget announcements stated in reference to the Government’s devolution plans that the Government will see to introduce further

council reorganisation across England. The Chancellor confirmed that the proposed devolution legislation will involve “working with councils to move to simpler structures that make sense for their local areas, with efficiency savings from council reorganisation helping to meet the needs of local people”.

12. Until the devolution framework is published it is unknown what this would mean for the two district councils, however it is likely that a formal view will be required in due course to inform any Oxfordshire-wide or national discussions via the reset FOP or any other channel.

FOP Reset

13. The paper recognises that partnership working should be focussed on areas where there is added value and not on those where there is duplication.

14. The following priority areas have been proposed:

- Devolution: developing proposals for devolved powers which would assist sustainable economic growth in line with the Oxfordshire vision
- Inclusivity and inequality: building a stronger, more productive and inclusive economy, and tackling inequality in all its forms:
 - Healthy place shaping and strong communities
 - Inclusive economy, skills & employability
- Sustainability: responding to the climate crisis and enhancing the natural environment:
 - Bio-diversity and nature recovery
 - Net-zero transition
 - Climate adaptation
- Infrastructure: place shaping and collaboration at the strategic level:
 - Connectivity and mobility
 - Energy, water, waste and AI
 - Possible joint initiatives for delivering affordable/social housing and a sustainable housing mix

15. The paper proposes the following approach is taken:

- To re-establish the partnership’s identity as a formal joint committee, with updated terms of reference so that the committee consists of the six council leaders
- A new name of the “Oxfordshire Leaders’ Board”

- To stand down FOP Advisory Groups and replace as required with “task and finish” groups where these are agreed by the Leaders
- To disband the FOP Scrutiny Panel
- Prepare for engagement with the Government on devolution agenda
- Ask officers to prepare revised terms of reference which will require approval by each individual council.

Next Steps

16. As set out above, the voting members of the FOP will be asked to endorse the proposed powers, purposes, priorities and steps set out in this report, and request officers to develop the plans in more detail, including a revised terms of reference.
17. The key element in these discussions will be the Government’s response to Oxfordshire County Council’s devolution expression of interest and the soon to be published White Paper. It is therefore important for both South and Vale to be respectively clear on their position on any devolution proposal that may be proposed by the Government. This will only be possible once the framework for devolution is published by Government.

Financial Implications

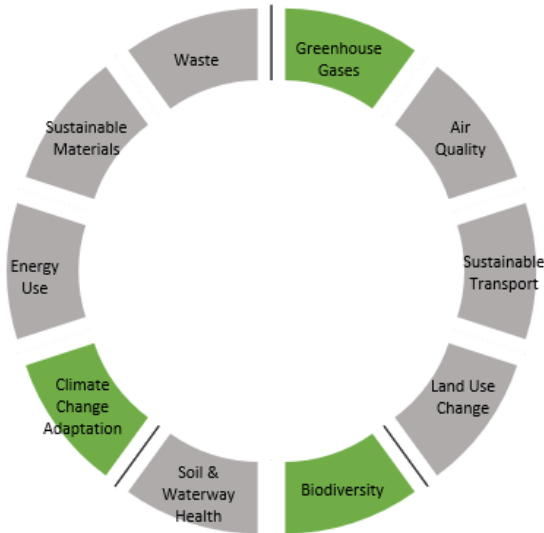
18. Whilst there are clearly financial implications for the councils’ involvement in FOP, at this stage there is no proposed change to the FOP budgets and staffing structure.

Legal Implications

19. There are no immediate legal implications from the approach, however any changes to the FOP Terms of Reference will require Cabinet approval. Adopting a formal position relating to any devolution position would require a full Council decision.

Climate and ecological impact implications

20. The climate and ecological impact implications are summarised in the climate impact assessment tool output below. The net zero transition, biodiversity and nature recovery and climate change adaptation have been identified as areas for partnership working. The collective effort to deliver the FOP's Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan is the focus of the council's work to reduce district-wide greenhouse gas emissions.



Equalities implications

21. This report is provided as an update only and therefore has no direct equality implications.

Risks

22. There is a risk that FOP member councils may not all endorse the interim position which will mean that FOP would continue as is, however this is unlikely given the broad agreement on way forward at the “Summit” meeting on 29 July 2024.

23. There is a risk that there will be disagreement on the way that future plans are developed, particularly in relation to the proposed “task and finish” groups. It will be important to ensure any participation in such groups adds value to the councils and does not duplicate work.

24. There is a risk there could be disagreement on the approach to any devolution proposal or the form of any reorganisation impacting Oxfordshire councils. It will therefore be imperative for any future decisions to be decided through the respective councils' proper governance routes.

Conclusion

25. By bringing this report to Joint Audit and Governance Committee, under the committee's remit to consider corporate governance matters, the councils' Leaders (as the councils' representatives on the FOP Board) are seeking for the committee to consider the role of FOP and how it operates and raise any recommendations regarding the way that FOP currently operates to ensure sound governance and

decision making for the councils, recognising that implications of any devolution arrangements are not yet known and will likely be a significant issue going forward.

Background Papers

FOP Refresh Paper 26 November