

# Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan

## Strategy & Action Plan – Workshop Report

This paper summarises the outcomes of the final two workshops - held on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June 2023 - to inform the preparation of a new Strategic Economic Plan for Oxfordshire. The workshops involved a range of stakeholders from the public, business, community and education sectors. They sought to explore the emerging strategy and develop a set of action areas that might be advanced to deliver it.

The paper sets out the background to the development of the SEP, provides an overview of the workshop discussions, and explains next steps.

## Background

### Introducing the new Strategic Economic Plan

In January 2023, Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) commissioned SQW (in association with Oxford Brookes Business School and glass.ai) to prepare a new **Strategic Economic Plan** (SEP).

The new SEP aims to support the case for future investment; influence sustainable, inclusive economic growth; and provide a framework for cooperation between national government, the private sector, local leadership and key institutions in Oxfordshire. It is being developed in the context of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership's *Strategic Vision for Long-Term Sustainable Development*. This looks ahead to 2050 and sets out a definition of 'Good Growth' and eleven guiding principles, which provide a foundation for developing future plans and strategies<sup>1</sup>. The SEP will contribute to the *Strategic Vision* through a focus on the economy as a key dimension of sustainable development and with a medium-term view over the next decade.

### The process of developing the SEP

Following an initial **scoping phase** in February, an **independent economic review** has gathered evidence to inform the new SEP. This has been structured around four 'deep dives':

- How can we **enable progression** within Oxfordshire and achieve more **inclusive economic growth**?
- How do we advance the **commitment to net zero and environmental sustainability** in shaping future economic growth?

<sup>1</sup> Future Oxfordshire Partnership (May 2021), [Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Long-Term Sustainable Development](#)

- How do we **secure the future of the ‘foundational economy’** (i.e., that part of the economy that supplies ‘everyday’ goods and services locally) within Oxfordshire?
- Recognising Oxfordshire’s world class strengths, how do we **accelerate innovation and diffusion** – both within Oxfordshire and across the UK?

Consultation has been important throughout. As well as the two workshops that are the focus of this note, two pairs of earlier workshops have already taken place: the first (in March) informed the deep dives, and the second (in late April) informed the assessment of ‘drivers of change’ which are shaping Oxfordshire.

## The June workshops

### Aims and objectives

The aim of the workshops on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June was to test the emerging strategy storyboard and the indicative set of action areas with stakeholders from across Oxfordshire.

### Introducing the Strategy and Indicative Action Areas

At each workshop, SQW provided an overview of the process to date and the headlines that had emerged from the Independent Economic Review process. SQW then introduced the strategy storyboard, showing the rationale for its development and connections with the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Vision. A number of action areas were proposed around four key ‘routes to impact’, namely:

- **Recognising all our assets and using them well.**
- **Creating new possibilities through innovation.**
- **Being an impactful and responsible citizen, nationally and globally.**
- **Enabling solutions through communities, locally.**

Workshop participants were asked four key questions as part of the discussion that followed:

- Are the ‘routes to impact’ identified the most important levers/key priorities for Oxfordshire’s new Strategy Economic Plan?
- To what extent do the indicative Action Areas respond to the opportunities and threats implicit within the four ‘Deep Dives’? Should any indicative Action Areas be added / removed? What are the top three priorities?
- What needs to happen to advance the delivery of the indicative Action Areas? What are some of the innovative possibilities in terms of funding/delivery that ought to be explored? How will you/your organisation contribute to the delivery process?

- To what extent does the proposed Strategy advance the themes of the FOP Vision? Would you like to see any changes to make it align better to the FOP vision whilst recognising its economic purpose? Do you agree with the proposal as to how progress might be measured?

### Stakeholder feedback

Group discussions were wide-ranging. The following paragraphs highlight some of the key themes that emerged.

*Are the 'routes to impact' identified the most important levers/key priorities for Oxfordshire's new Strategy Economic Plan?*

Generally there was broad agreement that the 'routes to impact' framework covered many of the critical issues for Oxfordshire's economy. The following points were made:

- There is a need to be clearer about what we mean by an 'asset'; does this focus on more 'traditional' economic assets (e.g. jobs, businesses, people), or does it include other assets that are fundamental to the wellbeing and sustainability of Oxfordshire? The workshops noted:
  - the need to recognise **food** as an asset, particularly the affordability, sustainability and security of it, as recognised in the Oxfordshire Food Strategy.
  - the importance of the **foundational economy**; this appears to have become a bit lost within the strategy as it stands, and should be reinserted as more of a focus.
  - the way in which **land** is used, both in terms of employment and housing land, but also how we make best use of agricultural land (both in terms of food production, but also biodiversity and natural capital).
  - the importance of **households**, and the unpaid work that happens within and beyond them.
- A greater understanding of being an 'impactful and responsible citizen' is required – it is not clear what 'responsible' means in this context.

*To what extent do the indicative Action Areas respond to the opportunities and threats implicit within the four 'Deep Dives' identified? Should any indicative Action Areas be added / removed? What are the top three priorities?*

Many of the indicative Action Areas were positively received and there was a logic in how each of the action areas would contribute towards the 'routes to impact' described. They also generally reflect the types of activities that the LEP should be seeking to deliver (and its role within the county).

It was suggested that as drafted, the narrative could be more assertive and ambitious. For example, should Oxfordshire's ambition be to *exceed* the national productivity average, rather than just to meet it? The point was made that the narrative could say more about Oxfordshire's 'value proposition' to the UK, and could be cast in more assertive language (e.g., "*we will do x,y,z*", rather than "*we will support the work of...*"). Some more specific additions/revisions were suggested:

### CREATING NEW POSSIBILITIES THROUGH INNOVATION

- The concept of '**living labs**' could work very well in Oxfordshire, but we need to be clear what we mean by this, how we will engage all partners in the process (including local planning policy) and what we should focus on. This should learn from the experience of previous exercises (e.g. Local Energy Oxford, Living Oxfordshire). There was however a suggestion that other places may already be ahead of Oxfordshire in bringing the 'living lab' concept forward, and that a focus on this could overlook some key areas of strength on which Oxfordshire could build.
- In this context, the '**breadth** of Oxfordshire's innovation ecosystem' was highlighted as a strength (across several fields of technology and in relation to supporting infrastructure). Further consideration could be given to developing a new partnership with Innovate UK, especially focused on making the most of the varied nature of Oxfordshire's innovation strengths.
- There could be a big opportunity around **retrofitting homes**, but this will likely need more funding to be explored in more detail. Retrofitting existing housing is important, but we should also be thinking about **new housing** and ensuring that this is built to the highest environmental standards possible (rather than having to retrofit these houses at a later date). Oxfordshire's innovation landscape should be at the heart of this challenge.
- It will be important to **ensure that the foundational economy is embedded within the concept of 'innovation'**: innovation can be social, community and policy-based, as well as technological.

### RESPONSIBLE GLOBAL CITIZEN

- There was much debate over the use of the word '**responsible**'. Should '**appropriate**' be used instead or as well?
- The critical word in the first action area is welcoming '**responsible**' international investors and investment. As a County, we should only be looking to attract responsible investment, but the LEP should be working to define what we mean by this and create a mechanism for improving investment into Oxfordshire (and the contribution investors can make to the wellbeing of residents / businesses locally).
- We should be looking to attract **domestic** and international tourists to Oxfordshire. Domestic tourism is more environmentally friendly and should be encouraged. Is

attracting international tourism sustainable in the long-term? Arguably it might be if this is just attracting day trips from London, but shouldn't be seeking to add more air miles.

- Should there be a reference to the **Oxford-Cambridge Arc** in here, and not just the 'Greater South East'?

#### USING ALL OUR ASSETS WELL

- There needs to be more around the importance of improving **all transport infrastructure**, and not just 'sustainable travel', otherwise there is a risk this just exacerbates current challenges (particularly around the labour market).
- Although **skills** are referenced, the importance of this is not emphasised strongly enough, particularly in relation to ensuring that the labour market is equipped to meet future needs (e.g. care sector shortages, skills needed to support retrofit activity).
- More detail is needed on **how we will co-ordinate support** to get people (back) into the labour market. There is a wide spectrum of support that is needed, not all of which can be controlled by the LEP/Oxfordshire, e.g. affordable childcare, recognising women's careers, addressing long-term health challenges etc. Solutions will be unique to each individual.
- Linked to the point above, we need to consider the **importance of the health and wellbeing** of our population, and in particular the **mental health** of the workforce (particularly in a post-pandemic world). This will be critical if we want to increase productivity and reduce absence, and will need a joined-up response.
- In similar vein, there is a need to pay more attention to **equality and diversity**.
- We need to think about the **role of affordable workspace** across Oxfordshire, particularly if we are keen to support and retain our foundational economy. We should be looking to work undertaken in London to understand more about what is being done in this area (particularly in relation to planning policy).
- We need to recognise the **importance of food** (and its security, availability and affordability) in line with what is put forward in the Oxfordshire Food Strategy.

#### VIBRANT LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- It is important that local communities do not feel that they are 'dictated to'. Instead, **policies and actions need to be co-designed in partnership with local communities** to ensure they are brought into the overall process and have ownership of the final project.
- **Community Employment Plans (CEPs)** are a real opportunity in Oxfordshire, but they need to be developed in partnership with local communities to make sure they reflect the types of skills that people want to learn and/or what local businesses might want to

recruit in the future. The LEP should take a lead in providing this voice into developers. There are examples of successful CEPs and these should be recognised and celebrated.

*What needs to happen to advance the delivery of the indicative Action Areas? What are some of the innovative possibilities in terms of funding/delivery that ought to be explored? How will you/your organisation contribute to the delivery process?*

It was noted that so far, much of the focus had been on “what”, rather than “how”. Some of the recurring themes relating to delivery were:

- The LEP should be leading the way in creating a **joined-up approach** to economic development in Oxfordshire and bringing partners together around a common ambition.
- There is some funding available through **S106 and CIL** from new development that should be unlocked.
- Some of the **retained business rates** from Enterprise Zones should be targeted on particular areas of activity that don’t attract funding from other sources. There are some really innovative ways of improving active travel infrastructure that don’t require huge amounts of resource that can vastly improve access between areas.
- Oxfordshire’s local authorities should look at opportunities to **pool their resources** (particularly around UKSPF) to jointly fund projects, taking advantage of economies of scale. The LEP could be a force for bringing partners together?
- There ought to be scope for **exemplifying and demonstrating success**, especially given the range of innovative approaches and institutions across Oxfordshire. Encouraging businesses (and others) to “do things differently” (e.g., in respect of employment practices and environmental sustainability) and understand the benefits is more likely to yield results than enforcement and regulation.
- We should not forget the role of **volunteering** in all of this. Oxfordshire is home to a very active volunteer base which can support activity in the future (but we also shouldn’t take it for granted).
- It is also important to recognise that **charities** ‘do a lot with very little’ – small grants can be very impactful.
- Although there are some good examples of **venture capital** in Oxfordshire, these pots of funding are small relative to US-based venture capital. Oxfordshire should be working more with government, pension funds and private finance to unlock more venture capital to support growth ambitions of our companies. Could local government pension pots be one approach?

*To what extent does the proposed Strategy advance the themes of the FOP Vision? Would you like to see any changes to make it align better to the FOP vision whilst recognising its economic purpose? Do you agree with the proposal as to how progress might be measured?*

There was some suggestion that the SEP could be broader – and that it could do more in relation to **equality and diversity**.

There was also some discussion of **timescales** – and some concern that the SEP should have a timeframe of more than ten years.

In relation to how OxLEP will measure the progress of the SEP (through the indicators mentioned in the presentation), there was broad agreement with the proposed metrics, although various comments were made:

- There should be more of a **balance between economic growth and sustainable wellbeing outcomes**; the current metrics are very focused on ‘economic’ outcomes, but could also be widened to include some of the metrics included within the ‘doughnut economics’ concept, as these can be helpful in thinking environmental sustainability and social inclusion metrics.
- There should be some mention of **retrofitting** activity if the LEP is going to be serious about targeting this as a priority; e.g. x% of homes at x EPC rating.
- There are metrics within **PAZCO** that could be picked up within this Strategy; e.g. modal shift in transport, and % of food grown locally.



# SQW

## Contact

For more information:

**Christine Doel**

*Director, SQW*

T: +44 (0)1223 209 400

E: [cdoel@sqw.co.uk](mailto:cdoel@sqw.co.uk)

2nd Floor

14 - 15 Mandela Street

London

NW1 0DU

[www.sqw.co.uk](http://www.sqw.co.uk)

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