

**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 14 April  
**Report of:** Director of Development  
**Title of Report:** Growth Board Environment Advisory Group  
 (Common Report to Council Cabinets)

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	This report, for noting, sets out a recent proposal which was agreed by the Growth Board on 22 March 2021 to establish an Environment Advisory Group, together with a set of Terms of Reference. Wider information is also provided concerning the establishment of a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire, and the Oxford to Cambridge Arc Environment Principles.
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	Pursue a Zero Carbon Oxford
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2020-24.
<b>Recommendations:</b> That Cabinet resolves to:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Support</b> the establishment of a Growth Board Environment Advisory group;</li> <li>2. <b>Endorse</b> the Oxford to Cambridge Arc Environment Principles as set out at Appendix 3, recognising that this statement of ambition applies to a diverse range of urban and rural communities, and that further evidentiary work will be required at a local level to understand their longer-term implications; and</li> <li>3. <b>Support</b> the development of an Arc Environment Strategy which will provide for how the principles can be delivered</li> </ol>	

<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1	Committee on Climate Change Spheres of Local Authority Influence
Appendix 2	Environment Advisory Group Terms of Reference.
Appendix 3	Shared regional principles for protecting, restoring and enhancing the environment in the Oxford to Cambridge Arc

## **Introduction**

1. This report is a common report current being taken to Oxfordshire County Council and the four Oxfordshire district council cabinets for noting. A section on considerations specific to Oxford City Council has been added at the end of the report.
2. The Growth Board's review of its own operating arrangements in 2020<sup>1</sup> concluded that its work would benefit from a greater consideration of environmental issues by strengthening the Board's structure and networks through an environmental 'work stream.' Since then, the Chair of the Oxfordshire Environment Board now sits on the Growth Board's Executive Officer Group to advise in the developmental stages of Growth Board programmes.
3. Work has also been underway to establish a Local Nature Partnership to guide nature recovery in Oxfordshire and the Growth Board has also endorsed a revised Terms of Reference which raises the priority of environmental considerations within its work, reflecting the commitments made by the constituent local authorities and partners concerning the climate emergency. The Board has also recently engaged on a draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire, which commits specifically to protecting and enhancing our natural environment, whilst pursuing a zero-carbon future. Finally, similar steps are also being taken at the Oxford to Cambridge Arc level, and a copy of the recently established Arc Environment Principles are included in this report for endorsement.
4. The Growth Board's Executive Officer Group has held a series of facilitated discussions to identify an approach and purpose for better integrating environment considerations into the Board's structure, whilst ensuring visibility and transparency in the work undertaken. Building on the improvements that have already been made in this area, the establishment of an Environment Advisory Group represents a natural and needed evolution of this work in order to support ambition and delivery in this space.
5. Through this process, it has been clear that the scale of ambition among the Growth Board's partners to address the ecological and climate emergencies (informed by the 6<sup>th</sup> carbon budget) is significant and could be leading in many respects. The draft Strategic Vision sets environmental aims that will need to be

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<sup>1</sup> See report to the Oxfordshire Growth Board, 28 January 2020.

supported by an appropriate group which can advise on cross-sector strategy and delivery of this work. Whilst more informal officer and member working groups have existed for some time with respect to environmental planning, the growing expanse of local and national policy developments (over 30 different statutory instruments/legislation covering net zero, natural resources, planning and Environment and Agriculture Bills) in this area requires a more structured partnership arrangement to ensure the Growth Board is on the front foot in responding to emerging opportunities and challenges they present.

### **An Environment Advisory Group**

6. It is recognised that additional capacity is needed where partners wish to respond to the climate and ecological emergencies in a collective and partnership led way. Whilst a Local Nature Partnership (LNP) will substantially increase capacity for nature's recovery, it will not practicably be able to cover all issues and topics under the environmental umbrella. It is therefore considered that an Environment Advisory Group of the Growth Board offers a visible and transparent approach to meeting this challenge.
7. Since the three existing Growth Board Advisory Sub groups (Housing, Infrastructure and Oxfordshire Plan 2050) were established in June 2018, positive feedback has consistently been given concerning their value in bringing together strategic cross-local authority conversations within their remit. Whilst these advisory groups have been tasked with overseeing detailed elements of the £215m Housing and Growth Deal, they also represent a useful space for wider discussions to help inform joint work. These groups are made up of executive councillors from each of the six councils of Oxfordshire, whilst the Infrastructure Sub group also has representation from the Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum.
8. In the first instance, it is recommended that the Environment Advisory Group be set up to broadly mirror the well-established Terms of Reference and membership arrangements of the existing sub-groups, being constituted as a sub-group of the Growth Board, with membership of the lead executive members from each local authority with environmental responsibilities. Unlike the other sub groups however, its remit would extend beyond the Housing and Growth Deal to cover the Growth Board's wider remit and work plan in line with the emerging Strategic Vision (across sectors), given that the Housing and Growth Deal is time limited. A report was received by the Growth Board on 22 March to endorse the Terms of Reference for this group.

### **A cross cutting, integrated and partnership led approach**

9. The role of the group would be *“to act in an advisory and consultative capacity to the Growth Board and provide strategic environmental oversight in the development and delivery of key projects and programmes within its remit”*. The Group would be expected to shape and prioritise its own work programme, and is encouraged to engage with partners and experts, and make use of co-option to strengthen its knowledge base and representation. Notes of each meeting would be published and reported to the Growth Board in the normal way. It is expected the Terms of Reference for this group (Appendix 2) might evolve over time to be more flexible to meet the needs of the Growth Board's work (e.g. membership,

remit etc.), as with the other sub groups. Any changes in this respect would come back to the Board for consideration.

10. The cross cutting and broad remit of the group will necessitate operating in an inclusive, flexible and prioritised way, whilst ensuring that wider partners and experts are engaged with as required to inform the work. The Group will have an important role in taking a whole system approach and embedding critical environmental thinking across the Growth Board's programmes (e.g. healthy place shaping). It must link closely with the existing sub groups and wider partnerships (such as the Local Nature Partnership) to ensure work is integrated and complementary to theirs. It should provide advice in aligning strategic environmental policy across local partners to ensure that net zero and ecological ambitions are harmoniously optimised. In demonstrating the breadth of the issues that might be considered, some non-exhaustive examples are listed below:

- air quality management (atmosphere)
- water quality management, supply and blue infrastructure (hydrosphere),
- nature recovery, biodiversity, biodiversity/environment net gain
- green space and green infrastructure
- agriculture
- forestry, woodlands and trees
- waste management
- energy production and supply
- transport
- buildings– net zero carbon and retrofit
- planning, place making and shaping

11. The Committee on Climate Change recently identified where the greatest influence can be leveraged among local authorities to seek environmental improvements.<sup>2</sup> It identified six spheres of influence as follows: direct control, procurement, place shaping, showcasing, partnerships and communicating and engaging. It is expected that these areas for action will be a key part of the Group's focus in advising the Growth Board. The full diagram can be found at Appendix 1.

### **A Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire**

12. Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) provide a joined up and strategic forum to help guide nature recovery in an integrated way to produce multiple benefits for local people, the economy and the environment. They are designed to promote a more formalised, systematic and collaborative approach to the management and enhancement of the natural environment and encompass a broad range of local organisations and people who are committed to this aim.

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<sup>2</sup> Committee on Climate Change, 2020. Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget. Available at: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Local-Authorities-and-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget.pdf>

13. The Growth Board has previously provided its support for establishing a LNP for Oxfordshire to guide work on nature recovery and link in with wider regional discussions concerning the natural environment. Oxfordshire is one of the few areas not to have an LNP, and the only area not to have an LNP within the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. Following a stakeholder engagement process, an initial workshop of interested parties took place in December 2020 and this confirmed strong support for an Oxfordshire LNP from a wide range of stakeholders. A small working group then got together to develop proposals further, and the outcomes of this work were reported to a second stakeholder workshop on the 11th March where again there was strong support. The details of LNP Board membership are under development and the current aim is to establish the LNP Board in time for a first meeting in September 2021.

### **Oxford to Cambridge Arc Environment Principles**

14. In 2020 the Arc Leadership Group Environment Working Group agreed to produce a set of Arc-wide Environment Principles. The principles are attached at Appendix 3. They are the result of a collaborative piece of work led by a range of partners and stakeholders including:

- Environmental NGOs (who drafted the first document)
- Local Nature Partnerships
- Local Government environment and planning policy representatives (we received responses from c. 20 local authorities, with representation from across the Arc)
- DEFRA
- Natural England
- Environment Agency
- MHCLG (planning policy lead)
- University representative from the Universities' Environment Group
- A LEP representative
- Anglian Water
- An Energy Hub representative

15. The document at Appendix 3 has been endorsed by the Arc Leadership Group Plenary on 09 March 2021. It is hoped by having developed consensus and support for these principles, including direct engagement with HM Government, that these will be used to support emerging environmental policies within the emerging Arc Spatial Framework. The agreed principles will be strengthened further after being publicly considered by every partner organisation. This information will be shared as part of a standard report to be used by all councils or LEPs in seeking local endorsement.

### **Status of Principles**

16. The principles are not formal policy but rather a shared statement of ambition for the Arc. They are intended to:

- support our position with respect to the environment policies emerging from the Arc Spatial Framework

- allow use of the Arc as a place for DEFRA to test and apply its 25-year plan and funding through pilots and projects
- support Local Planning Authorities with a frame of reference to further develop the principles through Local and Strategic Plans at a local and sub-regional level.

17. The Arc Leadership Group will next be developing an Arc Environment Strategy which will provide the route map to delivering against these ambitions, including trajectories for meeting ambitious future performance targets. There are five overarching principles:

- To target net zero carbon at a pan-Arc level by 2040;
- To protect, restore, enhance and create new nature areas and natural capital assets, including nationally and locally designated wildlife sites and priority habitats through the implementation of the spatial planning mitigation hierarchy of avoid, mitigate, compensate and gain;
- To be an exemplar for environmentally sustainable development, in line with the ambitions set out in the government's 25-year plan. This will incorporate a systems-based and integrated assessment and implementation approach. We will aim to go beyond the minimum legislated requirements for development;
- To ensure that existing and new communities see real benefits from living in the Arc;
- To use natural resources wisely.

18. Each theme has several sub-principles which describe further the outcomes we aspire to. Some of the sub-principles will evolve further as we develop our thinking (for example, a waste/circular waste principle).

### **Next steps**

19. Having been endorsed by the Plenary, the Arc Environment Principles will be shared amongst a wider audience including the development community to gain support and buy-in. It is intended that each partner organisation will now proceed to take these through local decision-making processes to provide even more support for the shared principles. The next piece of work for the Arc Environment Working Group is to develop an Environment Strategy which will set out a comprehensive plan for how the principles will be delivered in the Arc. It is likely that the strategy will take 12-18 months to complete.
20. Concerning the Growth Board's Environment Advisory Group, subject to endorsement of the proposed Terms of Reference at Appendix 2, the next step would be to return to the Growth Board at its next meeting in June to confirm the final membership, chairing and resourcing arrangements for the Group. The Executive Officer Group will ensure that all the necessary preparatory arrangements are made to allow the Advisory Group's work to launch formally soon after.

## Financial implications

21. The financial and resourcing implications of establishing both a Local Nature Partnership and an Environment Sub-group will need to be considered by each local authority at the appropriate level.

## Conclusion

22. This report summarises some of the many changes that are taking place among Growth Board partners to drive forward positive change with regards to the climate and ecological emergencies. A specific action requests Cabinet endorsement of the Arc Environment Principles set out at appendix 3.

## Oxford City Council specific considerations

23. The Environmental Sub-Group is a welcome addition as a vehicle to help provide strategic alignment and a platform for co-operation and co-ordination of effort across a range of inter-relating workstreams. As such, given this area is a top priority for the City Council, the principle of establishing the group is one that should be supported.
24. Moreover, it is worth noting that the City Council has been at the forefront of establishing the precursor to this sub-group, working closely with the other four district councils to develop a Statement of Common Interest.
25. Further work is now required in relation to the membership, and also how the work of the sub-group will inform wider strategic development and delivery. This includes the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan, where there is a need to ensure that evidence submitted to inform the plan's development is robust, to ensure its soundness.
26. It also worth noting that the Arc Principles are a statement of intent and not policy. Further work is required for them to inform robust policy making. This is particular of note in relation to issues of delivery in urban areas, such as Oxford. The City Council has flagged this risk and will continue to seek to influence the evolution of the principles.

<b>Report author:</b>	Tom Bridgman
Job title	Executive Director, Development
Service area or department	Development
Telephone	01865 252950
e-mail	<a href="mailto:tbridgman@oxford.gov.uk">tbridgman@oxford.gov.uk</a>

**Background Papers:** None

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