

Public speakers

8 June 2021



1. Suzanne McIvor on behalf of Cherwell Development Watch Alliance¹

In April 2021 all of Oxfordshire's Local Authorities agreed the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire.

The principles in the Strategic Vision, which we are told '*reflect local people's opinions and priorities*' (i) have not been the subject of any statutory consultation.

Despite the Growth Board's announcements to the contrary (ii), we are concerned that the Strategic Vision will not have any effective influence on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (OP2050), or in fact any other future plans or strategies. Our reasoning on this is as follows:

OP 2050 will be the subject of a Regulation 18, part 2 consultation in the summer of 2021. This spatial plan supposedly has the Strategic Vision as its 'cornerstone'. (iii)

Yet at the same time, in the summer of 2021, Growth Board Officers have said (iv) that they will be working on the Strategic Vision and in particular on how to measure success, appropriate reporting and when it will be appropriate to review and update the Strategic Vision.

Can the Growth Board explain how the Strategic Vision can be a 'cornerstone' of OP2050 if fundamental aspects of the Strategic Vision, such as measuring outcomes and reporting, will still be incomplete during the period when OP2050 is undergoing the Regulation 18, part 2 consultation?

Answer: The intention of the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision is to set an overarching Vision for the county 2050. It is non statutory in nature but was widely consulted upon and is, the Board believes, a helpful summary of the principles that should govern how we respond to and manage growth - in its widest definitions – in Oxfordshire to 2050.

The intention of the Oxfordshire Plan is to provide one interpretation of that Vision, a spatial interpretation to the same date. The Vision requires further work to develop measurements of success. This requires the range of strategies that provide Oxfordshire with the framework for the future to be aligned to the Vision over time. Those Strategies will all require outcome measurement and from these we will be able to describe a suite of outcomes for the Vision.

The Oxfordshire Plan is at what's called the Regulation 18 stage where the district planning authorities intend to consult publicly on a range of options at a policy level. It is therefore a consultation on options rather than any decisions on which options will be included in the final plan. The plan is not therefore at a stage where outcomes are being decided, where we agree there would be a need for at least an understanding of how these decided outcomes would be measured.

¹ See endnotes/references at end of this document

Our view is that at this stage what's important is that we ensure that there is a strong 'golden thread' that those reading the Plan can understand between the ambitions of the Strategic Vision and the range of policy options offered for consultation by the Oxfordshire Plan. It is this golden thread that will - correctly at this stage- demonstrate the influence that the Strategic Vision has had on the Draft Oxfordshire Plan.

2. Suzanne McIvor on behalf of Cherwell Development Watch Alliance²

Growth Board Officers have indicated (v) that the relationship between the Strategic Vision and OP2050 might require legal opinion to ensure that it strengthens the Board's approach to strategic plan-making.

We suggest that the Strategic Vision, sitting as nothing more than a statement of ambition alongside the statutory OP2050, will not strengthen the Board's approach to strategic plan making.

In fact we predict a situation where growth targets for the next thirty years (economic and housing) are 'set in stone' via OP2050 but the protection of ensuring this is 'Good Growth' is offered by the Strategic Vision which will be subject to unilateral review and updating by the Growth Board:

- a) Has the Board clarified its thinking on whether the Strategic Vision strengthens the Board's approach to strategic plan-making and if so what is the result?
- b) Has legal opinion been sought? If not, why not and when will legal opinion be sought?

Answer: One of the initial reasons for the development of the Strategic Vision was a recognition that such a Vision could provide a helpful overarching framework for strategic plan making. This was the lesson of similar plans elsewhere and the strong advice from commissioned experts. The reports to the Growth Board set this out and reminded the Board that from this core proposal developed the ambition that the Vision could be more than just a Vision for the Oxfordshire Plan but an overall Vision for the county's future.

We note the questioner's views on the value of the Vision but do not agree that because it is non statutory it doesn't strengthen the approach to plan making. We believe that the Vision, as a statement of ambition, can only strengthen our approach, and we were encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive response to the Vision's consultation.

The questioner is correct however that part of the project to develop the Vision was agreement that we would seek legal opinion on its effectiveness as a framework for the Oxfordshire Plan. This commission is ongoing as part of wider legal opinion on the development of the Oxfordshire Plan and will be provided to the Board to consider alongside the responses to the Oxfordshire Plan consultation.

3. Michael Tyce on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire (address)

It is CPRE's happy task today to congratulate the Growth Board for its expressed commitment to keep planning decisions regarding the notional Arc within the control of the relevant local authorities, in its response to the Scrutiny Committee point six.

It is not only right and just that planning decisions should only be made by the representatives of the people most affected – that is, those of us who already live and work here – but it is the only position consistent with the commitment in the 2050 Vision that future plans will be "Oxfordshire-specific and reflective of local people's views.

² See endnotes/references at end of this document

Nevertheless, there is also room for concern in the Growth Board's response, which is at best capable of misinterpretation. Scrutiny recommends that "local planning decisions should be for local authorities". That could be taken to mean all planning decisions that affect people locally or just those deemed to be within the competence of local authorities by MHCLG. The Growth Board responds that planning decisions should be taken "at the right level". Who decides what the right level is? What does the phrase "planning decisions" encompass? Is it in the narrow sense of responses to planning applications, or in the widest sense as including spatial strategies?

At the heart of this is whether in principle plans for the Arc will be bottom up – starting with the informed wishes of local people, with decisions made by locally elected representatives, with only unavoidably central decisions like the routes of railways made centrally, and then by local authorities in concert rather than imposed by Government; or whether it will be top down with detailed strategies decided in London, issued as policies, and local authorities able only to decide the minutiae of detail, metaphorically the colour of the door knockers, even then constrained by Government mandated design guide policy.

We all deserve to know clearly how this process is to be conducted, not just because it so personally affects us all but because in practical terms it is essential to get hearts and minds on board from the start – especially as we have already been promised (to repeat) that the future will be Oxfordshire specific and reflective of local people's views. It is unfortunate that there is so much room for misinterpretation, and it is recommended that the Growth Board should revise and amplify its statement against OxCam Arc Recommendation 6 to make it clear and unequivocal.

It is also unfortunate that in the spirit of engagement and transparency, the spatial options emerging for the 2050 Plan, which the committee considered in mid-March, had not already been consulted on with stakeholders like CPRE or with the public. The earlier the engagement the more closely the public will feel part of the process, and, indeed, who knows, the public and stakeholders could have valuable insights to offer, and might indeed have supported options that will have been rejected internally before the consultations officially begin.

CPRE recognises the need for economic growth and its potential to benefit both urban and country people. We applaud the 2050 Vision in recognising that the environment is an equal priority – not least as Oxfordshire's economic success is largely attributable to its unique quality. So too is people's quality of life. These must be absolute constraints on the amount of Arc development that our County should accommodate, especially as we have already done our share through the Growth Deal and need to preserve the exceptional qualities of Oxfordshire for future generations.

A vital ingredient in that mix is that the people most affected – those of us here already – feel engaged throughout in the process and can be assured that decisions affecting our lives will be taken to the greatest practicable extent with their our participation.

Answer: Growth Board members are happy to confirm their view that planning decisions should be taken at the local level wherever possible, using the local development framework which includes adopted local plans and neighbourhood plans. Of course, we are obliged to have regard to national planning policy, and we expect that the government led Arc Spatial Framework will in due course form an addition to national policy. We do not expect the Arc Spatial Framework to supersede local plans or the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, nor indeed to have

any interest in door knockers. We believe it should focus on matters of regional significance and should seek to take a leading role in the national response to climate change.

4. Ian Ashley on behalf of Need Not Greed Oxfordshire

We are hopefully coming through a time when our lifestyle and expectations have been changed by the Covid pandemic, which has highlighted the importance of good public health and local determination.

Is now the time for you, as our elected local leaders, to start joining up your thinking around climate change and the natural world, recognising the need for only sufficient economic prosperity to meet the needs of people and planet? This would require you to push back on government action to overheat the southeast rather than keep their election promise to level up the UK. It would also mean you would have to look to face up to the challenge of how to deal with the chronic under-funding from central government that previous elected local leaders tried and failed to resolve by committing to build houses that are way beyond local need. Is the logical extension of this position that Oxfordshire local authorities should now withdraw from the Arc Leaders Group, which looks set to entrench rather than resolve these problems?

Answer: The Growth Board believes it would be unhelpful to disengage from regional discussions that affect Oxfordshire's future, particularly when the Arc Leaders Group has been set up to give a voice to local leaders in responding to the Government's Arc agenda. Thinking is increasingly joined up across the Arc with respect to climate change and the natural world, and this can be seen between the Arc Environment Principles, the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision, and a range of local action plans. We expect to see an Arc Environment Strategy being developed soon. The Board has also lobbied government on issues such as flooding and building standards to strengthen our ability to act locally on climate change. We recognise the complexity and diversity of opinions when it comes to housing numbers, and we will pay close attention to the responses to the forthcoming consultation on the Oxfordshire Plan.

5. Councillor Jane Murphy, (South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council) (address)

Thank you chair for allowing me to address the Growth Board. I will be short, and to the point.

As a previous Chair of the Board, I recognise that it is an onerous responsibility, one where the good work achieved by the Board is often hidden and incorrect pre-conceptions about the role of the Board tend to dominate. However, I wanted to congratulate Cllr Smith on her time as Chair, and the manner in which she has represented not only this Board, but residents across Oxfordshire. The work of this Board in taking forward a positive environmental agenda, building on the work of the climate emergencies declared by the local district and city councils has been pleasing to see.

This work is vital, and it is with pride that I recall I was Chair of this board when my own Council, of which I was then Leader, declared a climate emergency and I would commend the Board and the officers across Oxfordshire who have undertaken the work needed to achieve delivery of our collective aim to take forward policies and approaches that will support us to reach net zero and increase bio-diversity. It is clear that working with the Ox-Cam Arc, which is far from being our enemy and will be key to our achieving this, is vital and the impact of our officers, and of Cllr Smith on arc policy development is clear and I wish to applaud that.

Cllr Emily Smith has led this board with distinction, and with fairness to all parties, councils and partners – however, as she has said at this board before, I feel that its name – the Growth Board - is misleading and the cause of considerable confusion, after all the predominate ‘power’ of this meeting is to share information and to develop collective influence. Can I suggest that it would be fitting, as the Chair moves on to another, for the next meeting of the Board to reconsider its name, and to look forward with ever increasing positivity about the role it can play in the promotion and delivery of climate and ecological recovery.

Answer: I (Councillor Emily Smith) would like to thank Councillor Murphy for her kind words and support for the direction this board has taken over the past year. As I mentioned earlier in this meeting, I still believe a name change is required and I hope that the new chair and other leaders will work with me to make that happen. I wanted to clarify one point made in the question about our approach to the Arc. The Arc Project is a government led project. The spatial framework that MHCLG are development may or may not help us achieve net-zero and biodiversity gain, this is not yet known. While the Arc Leaders Group has and will continue to represent local concerns and lobby government to back our local ambitions on the environment – there is no guarantee that the government will listen. So, while the question refers to working ‘with the Ox-Cam Arc’, I would personally describe the action we are taking as working with other councils and partners across the Arc Region to lobby for whatever the government does in our region to be as positive for local people and the environment as possible.

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES to Questions 1 and 2.

i) Extract from the Growth Board website at 14th May 2021: *Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Long-Term Sustainable Development sets out what future growth in Oxfordshire should look like based on improving social, environmental, and economic wellbeing for all. It prioritises tackling climate change and reflects local people's opinions and priorities as given through a range of engagement exercises. The Vision provides a number of shared ambitions that reflect the priorities of the county, underpinned by a definition of 'good growth' and a set of Guiding Principles.....*

ii) Extract from the Growth Board website at 14th May 2021: *Now the strategic vision has been agreed, it will not replace or set the specific vision for any individual communities or partner organisations but instead will act as a framework for future plans and strategies for Oxfordshire, such as the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.*

iii) Extract from Supplementary Papers, Oxfordshire Growth Board Scrutiny Panel, held in the Virtual meeting viewable by weblink on Tuesday, 16 March 2021 at 6.30 pm, pdf page 7, para 34 states in respect of the Strategic Vision: *'It is hoped that this balanced statement of ambition reflecting the priorities of the county will become the cornerstone of all future plans and strategies for Oxfordshire.'*

iv) As for iii above but pdf page 6, para 31 states: *'The next steps will then be consideration of how we will measure progress against the ambitions of the Vision. Officers intend to develop a business case for this next phase of the project over the summer of 2021. This will include agreement of how we measure success, appropriate reporting of these and when it would be appropriate to review and update the Vision, something that was supported in the engagement process'.*

v) As for iii above but pdf page 7, para 33 states: *'Although the Vision is explicitly non statutory, the Board will recall that in the October report introducing the Vision, officers suggested that the relationship between the Vision and OxPlan may require legal opinion to ensure that it strengthens our approach to strategic plan-making. Once the Board endorses the Vision officers leading the OxPlan will consider whether commissioning this advice is appropriate and report any conclusion through reports on the Oxplan.*