

Public speakers

25 January 2022

1. Michael Tyce, on behalf of CPRE, Oxfordshire

On December 15th SODC Planning Committee in a narrow decision relying on the Chairman's casting vote permitted a 123 hectare solar farm on productive agricultural land in the Green Belt, highly visible on the slope of the Oxford Heights, overlooking the City and clearly within its setting. If a site like this is considered appropriate, then nowhere is protected. The officer had said that the very special circumstance needed to outweigh Green Belt constraints was that the council has declared a climate emergency with a target to be a carbon neutral district by 2030. As the Climate Action Officer put it, to meet zero carbon we need to reach South Oxfordshire's full potential for renewable energy, that is in effect to approve every application.

The officer noted that the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 (SOLP 2035) does not identify suitable (or therefore unsuitable) areas or specific sites for renewable or low carbon energy projects. Neither do the plans of any of the other Districts and nor does the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan apparently intend to do so. It should because the scale of what is in store on present policies is overwhelming.

We do not pretend to be experts, but the 123 hectare site in question was said to be capable of providing the requirements of 11,700 homes. Efficiency of solar farms varies, so let's round that to one hectare powering a hundred homes for simplicity. There were 280,000 homes in Oxfordshire in 2021, with another 100,000 in the pipeline. Providing solar electricity for those would require 3800 hectares of land. Only 15% of electricity goes to households, the rest to industry and commerce. Carbon neutrality for Oxfordshire would therefore require 23,000 hectares. Oxfordshire has 260,000 hectares overall, so that would be 9% of the whole county covered in solar panels. And that is before we come to the growth in electricity usage planned as we switch to electric cars and heat-pumps.

Moreover, these solar farms would be concentrated in areas where there were good connections to the grid. The Green Belt – because it surrounds our major City – is one of these, as are the smaller towns and the powerlines connecting them. Potential land use on this scale – at least 9% of the whole County covered in solar panels to achieve carbon neutrality on present consumption, rising exponentially as cars and domestic heating became electric, **urgently needs a proper plan with figures, a spatial strategy, appropriate policies**, not just to make sure these solar farms are sensitively sited but to avoid undue loss of valuable agricultural land and amenity. Furthermore, it has to be a pan-Oxfordshire Plan as the opportunities and constraints will be very different from one District to another.

Although all the Local Plans reference general climate change and net zero ambitions, albeit with different target dates, none quantify the outcome or a spatial strategy to meet it. Neither does the 2050 consultation document, which will inform the next round of Local Plans. If we carry on piecemeal without a proper quantified structure and spatial plan the County – and particularly the Green Belt - will be overwhelmed. Meeting renewable energy targets overall cannot mean that every opportunity must be seized willy-nilly, wherever it arises at landowner

or developer whim, which was effectively the rationale for the very special reason which permitted a Green Belt agricultural site halfway up the Oxford Heights in the setting of the City.

A spatial and quantitative strategy for renewable energy – in Oxfordshire’s case essentially solar – would mean considering both the physical constraints – the location of the grid – as well as the heritage and environmental constraints –productive agricultural land, the Green Belt, open landscape. That would help not only understanding of the magnitude of the task but also the parameters within which the development would be undertaken.

Will the Future Oxfordshire Partnership therefore commit to producing a county-wide spatial and quantitative strategy for renewable energy?

Answer: The Oxfordshire Energy Strategy was launched by the Local Enterprise Partnership in 2019 and sets out an ambitious framework to enable the county to be at the forefront of clean energy innovation and is overseen by the Board’s Clean Growth Sub-Group. There is a clear need to increase the proportion of renewable electricity generated within the county to achieve net zero. The Oxfordshire Plan will need to consider future infrastructure needs for renewable energy generation capacity, to set a framework for delivery as part of a sustainable spatial strategy for Oxfordshire. There is a strand of work within the plan which will look at these issues and we would welcome comments on this at the Regulation 19 consultation stage. A focus on this work may also arise from the emerging zero carbon Oxfordshire work, though that is still in development, and it can be raised with the Environment Advisory Group.

2.Linda Ward, Cherwell Development Watch Alliance

At the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel meeting on 17th January 2022 Need Not Greed Oxon asked for clarity around the decision making and scrutiny of two key decisions: (1) the number of homes to be planned for in the 2050 Oxfordshire Plan and (2) whether there would be a review of the OGNA. This can be summarised as: who decides; how do they decide; and when do they decide?

We are encouraged that the verbal answer to the question agreed with the principles of openness and scrutiny. However, the lack of a detailed timetable at this late stage in the plan process is alarming.

The timeline on the OP2050 website is already out of date and early 2022 poses the challenges of the Purdah period. We cannot see how it will be possible to make these key decisions on the Oxfordshire Plan, with full and meaningful scrutiny, within this timeframe. After so many years and so many delays it would be very wrong to rush the last and most important part of this plan.

We ask the following:

1. For an explanation of why there is no detailed up to date timetable?
2. When will a detailed timetable be available?
3. Is the Future Oxfordshire Partnership prepared to seek a further extension to the timetable if necessary?
4. We continue to work on the OGNA and our concerns, rather than diminishing are escalating. Can we have an assurance that the calls from a number of high-level interested groups for a review of the OGNA will not be rejected purely because the current timetable does not allow it?

Answer: Thank you for your question. Officers are currently reviewing the work programme and timeline for the Oxfordshire Plan in the context of the recent consultation and the responses made. This work also includes considering the inter-relationships between the

Oxfordshire Plan and Local Plan Reviews, and we aim to conclude that review soon. That detail must be worked through to help inform the next stages of the process including our timetable, and we will need to engage will engage with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities when that work is complete. Decisions on whether to commission further evidence, such as the requested review of OGNA, will be based on the technical requirements of ensuring that the Plan is found sound at the examination.