

The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel Public speakers

7 June 2022



Question

1. Suzanne McIvor on behalf of Cherwell Development Alliance has asked the following question

Statutory consultations, particularly those around Local Plans and particularly the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (OP2050) are based around documents which amount to thousands of pages of technical data. To read, assimilate and respond to these in a meaningful way is beyond most members of the Oxfordshire public. So many of these people turn to groups like ours to represent their views.

The 2021 consultation on the Oxfordshire Plan produced only 422 responses from individuals and organisations and a significant proportion of these was from promoters/agents/ developers. The level of responses from individuals was very, very low. This supports our assertion that community groups play an important role in representing communities in consultations.

However, when community groups such as CDWA respond to consultations the response is treated as just one response, not as a representation on behalf of its members. We feel this is not a fair reflection of the reality of the situation.

In Oxfordshire community groups are fortunate to have able volunteers who are willing and capable of drafting responses to consultations. But they do this in their own time, using their own resources and often by balancing with their other commitments. This is not their paid job as it is with the many promoters/agents/developers who will respond. Similarly, our volunteers don't have access to teams of support staff and other helpful resources. We feel that this imbalance between voluntary groups like CDWA and those who represent vested interests ie those who stand to gain financially from the resulting development, needs to be addressed. We also believe that responses from community groups should be given more weight to reflect their role in representing significant numbers of members of the Oxfordshire public.

We are aware that simple online questionnaires are used to encourage responses from individuals. But we are concerned that these are too simplistic and can be manipulated to encourage particular responses. We are also aware that a variety of engagement methods are used but the output from these is less direct feedback than written responses to consultations.

We ask the Scrutiny Panel to consider the imbalance that we have highlighted and to ask the Future Oxfordshire Partnership to see how this can be addressed. As an example, the Oxfordshire Plan Officer Team could be asked to give greater weight to the views of local residents and community groups than to those with vested financial interests, such as developers, who may well be based outside of the county.

2. David Young on behalf of Need Not Greed Oxfordshire has asked the following question:

Need Not Greed Oxfordshire (NNGO) is grateful to you for your support in seeking clarity on important aspects of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (OP2050). NNGO feels that this Scrutiny Panel, like those of the City and Districts, has a crucial role to play in the OP2050 plan-making process.

However, as has happened in the past with the City and District Scrutiny Panels, we feel that this panel's role is being undermined. A good example of this is provided by the response of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOXP) to the Panel's recommendation last month.

The recommendation was:

'That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership be requested to:

- a. undertake a further Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 consultation.*
- b. provide a detailed update on the timetable for the production of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.*
- c. initiate a peer review of the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment.*
- d. set out how decisions relating to future housing numbers within the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 will be taken in an open and transparent way.'*

The response given by FOXP was:

'As we have previously explained, these are matters for decision by the individual councils and not by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership itself.

The local planning authorities are currently reviewing the evidence base, the programme and the timetable of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 in light of consultation responses and comments received.

Formal decisions will be taken openly in meetings of the city and district councils.'

The whole point of the FOXP is that it co-ordinates the councils' work on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 via the Advisory Group. We already know that decisions will be made by individual councils, but the local planning authorities are working under the FOXP umbrella and we can reasonably expect FOXP to provide more transparent answers than this - particularly when the same questions have been asked *repeatedly* for months. We feel this response is indicative of the general attitude to this Scrutiny Panel which is merely to deflect major concerns with meaningless statements. We believe that this attitude undermines the value of the Scrutiny function that you perform.

It is obvious from the minutes of the OP2050 Advisory Group that a lot of work has been taking place including joint workshops between the Advisory Group and the Council Leaders, but little detail is provided. For example, why are these joint workshops taking place and what does the "six stage, step by step process to securing consensus" that is mentioned in these minutes refer to? And will the output of each of these meetings be published?

The lack of transparency being offered to this Scrutiny Panel is disquieting.

We urge you to:

- Make it clear that the responses given to the Panel's Recommendation 1 from the last meeting are unsatisfactory
- Ask for more detailed responses
- Ask for more details regarding the nature and output of the joint workshops.