

Public speakers

27 September 2022

1. Ian Green has asked the following question on behalf of the Oxford Civic Society

It was a huge surprise and disappointment when the district and city councils announced the abandonment of Oxfordshire 2050 Plan preparation.

Recommendation #1 The OCS recommends that good planning work achieved in the course of preparation of the Plan needs to be deployed in the updating of the Local Plans. In addition, the public have responded to Oxfordshire 2050 consultations in various ways and their contributions should not be abandoned.

OCS recommends that the Future Oxfordshire Partnership agrees to public discussions on making good use of work done to date on the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.

Response

The update report on the agenda about the Oxfordshire Plan includes as one of its principles that the understanding achieved of countywide and district issues and priorities, is utilised, where appropriate. Each Council will consider this point as they prepare their plans and strategies, and there will be opportunities for the public to engage through the public consultations.

Recommendation #2 - At the same time OCS recognises that to update the Local Plans of the districts and city, some kind of agreement on Oxfordshire growth rate and distribution is still necessary: without evidence that the Local Plans have been prepared in cooperation with neighbouring local authorities (the 'Duty to Cooperate'), the Local Plans will not be approved by the Planning Inspectorate / Secretary of State.

Optimisation of strategic infrastructure investment could be a major casualty of the abandonment of the 2050 Plan – care needs to be taken to limit the damage.

OCS recommends that the Future Oxfordshire Partnership identifies and makes public the strategic infrastructure investment implications of each local planning authority establishing its own rate, pace and distribution of employment and housing growth.

Response

The Councils have each adopted the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire, and remain committed to working together on strategic infrastructure issues. The update report on the agenda about the Oxfordshire Plan includes as one of its principles that we continue to work together on the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy, and officers are considering how this will sit alongside and support Local Plan processes.

Recommendation #3 - As noted in the OCS report published just before the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan abandonment, the links between the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (and its emerging Travel Plans), the Local Industrial Strategy, the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy

and Pathways to Net Zero need to be carefully considered. Public discussion needs to continue on strategic (inter-local planning authority) planning matters and OCS will be pleased to contribute to this.

OCS recommends that as Oxfordshire strategic plans still need to be well coordinated and synchronized with, and integrated into, the local plans, the future Oxfordshire partnership should publicly debate how this is done.

Final point - An Oxfordshire spatial plan is a very useful tool if we are to optimise strategic infrastructure investment and achieve economic, social, and environmental goals. Is it a profound mistake to abandon it? What message does abandonment send to government and private sector investors?

Response

The update report on the agenda about the Oxfordshire Plan outlines how the Councils can continue to work together and engage with each other on strategic planning issues. The Future Oxfordshire Partnership agreed the recommendation that it should retain an Advisory Group on Planning involving relevant Cabinet Members from each of the County, City, and District Councils. This will be a useful forum for the Councils to update each other on their respective plans as they are prepared, and for discussion on strategic planning issues, thereby helping coordination and synchronisation.

2. Suzanne McIvor has asked the following question on behalf of Need Not Greed Oxfordshire

Oxford City Council's Preferred Options document for its Oxford Local Plan 2040 will be out for public consultation at the start of October. This explains that the City intends to commission a piece of work to establish its housing need with "the methodology agreed with as many of our neighbouring districts as possible".

However, the document also states that the City considers that "circumstances are likely to exist in Oxfordshire that justify using an alternative method to calculate housing need, owing to its important role in the local and national economy".

We understand from these statements that Oxford City does not intend to adopt the Standard Method to calculate its housing need and will be looking for an alternative method which gives rise to a higher housing need, to support its economic growth ambitions. As it has in the past, Oxford City will be looking to the Districts to take its unmet housing "need".

Opinion Research Services, experienced housing market assessment consultants, did a report on the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA) for Cherwell Development Watch Alliance earlier this year. It stated: "Based on updated Office for National Statistics projections for Oxford City we consider that there may be exceptional circumstances in Oxford City (but not in the other Districts) for adopting a *housing need figure substantially lower than that given by the Standard Method* (as currently formulated)".

This statement is still valid but is directly at odds with the approach that Oxford City is taking by seeking to increase its housing requirement.

We believe there are really important issues of transparency and accountability here. We have phrased our questions as simply as possible and numbered them, as we wish to have a clear and full response to all questions.

1. Does the Partnership agree that the Duty to Co-operate is *not* a duty to cater for the growth ambitions of any particular local authority?

Response:

Paragraph 7 on the update report on the Oxfordshire Plan includes the following comment on the Duty to Cooperate:

“The Duty to Cooperate is a legal test that requires cooperation between local planning authorities and other public bodies to maximise the effectiveness of policies for strategic matters in Local Plans. Discussions on strategic housing issues between relevant partners will be an important aspect of the Duty to Cooperate in Oxfordshire. Local Plan examinations will test whether the Duty has been satisfied and consider the soundness of submitted plans.”

The Duty to Cooperate is not a duty to agree but it does require local planning authorities to engage constructively with each other on strategic cross boundary issues.

2. Does the Partnership agree that, given the fact that the OGNA was heavily criticised by a wide range of parties, it would:
 - a) Not be appropriate to use the same consultants in taking forward preparation of an evidence base for any of the emerging Local Plans

The procurement of consultants for a Local Plan evidence base is a matter for the relevant local planning authorities.

- b) The tendering process for any such consultants should take into account the amount of work they carry out for developers?

These tendering processes are the responsibility of the relevant local planning authorities. Local planning authorities will wish to satisfy themselves that any consultants they engage have the necessary expertise, and that there are no conflicts of interest for them in carrying out the work. It would be inappropriate to set procurement criteria discriminating against consultants who have worked for the development sector in the past.

3. Professor Richard Harding has asked the following question on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire.

The questions below were raised to FOP members via an earlier letter and we are grateful for Councillor Wood’s reply on behalf of the FOP. However, we note that the update on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 published as part of the FOP papers largely fails to address the issues raised and therefore think the questions bear repeating.

As long-standing supporters of strategic planning in the county, CPRE Oxfordshire has been concerned to learn of the demise of the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.

It is disappointing that those Councils determined to pursue an aggressive growth agenda could apparently not be persuaded that this would be in conflict with the broader social, environmental, and economic Vision for the county that has previously been agreed.

The current situation raises a number of significant questions:

1. Transparency & democracy – the public is entitled to a clear explanation of where agreement was reached and could be fed into Local Plans, and where agreement could not be reached and for what reasons. How will this happen?

Response

The statement issued by the Leaders of the City and District Councils in August explained that it is with regret that they were unable to reach agreement on the approach to planning for future housing needs within the framework of the Oxfordshire Plan. On other aspects of the plan there was broad agreement, and the councils all remain committed to the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire which they all adopted last year

2. Spatial strategy – if, as has been indicated, the disagreement is on the issue of housing numbers alone, is it not possible to proceed with establishing a broad spatial strategy that could guide whatever growth does finally come forward? This is vital in ensuring the protection of our key assets – our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Oxford Green Belt and core nature recovery areas.

The housing questions were fundamental questions for the Oxfordshire Plan to address. The requirements on this issue are set out on the National Planning Policy Framework. It would not be possible to set out a sound spatial strategy without an understanding of housing need.

3. Key emerging policies - There were a number of strong emerging policies that clearly make most sense if applied at a county-wide level, such as those on zero carbon housing and nature recovery. These policies are urgent, to help meet our climate and biodiversity emergencies. Were these agreed? If so, how can they be taken forward in a logical and consistent way? If not, how will agreement now be reached?

Each of the City and District Councils will consider their policies in this area as they prepare their plans and strategies. The update report on the agenda about the Oxfordshire Plan includes as one of its principles that the understanding achieved of countywide and district issues and priorities, is utilised, where appropriate.

It is important to recognise that a new Local Nature Partnership has been established, this is linked to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership and can help develop Oxfordshire's approach to nature recovery. In addition, the Environment Advisory Group of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership is there to help coordinating work on climate action, including work on pathways to a zero carbon Oxfordshire and solar energy.

4. Renewables – at the moment, Oxfordshire's farmland is under threat from a wave of speculative applications for solar industrial units. There is an urgent need for a county-wide strategy, supported by public consultation and engagement, setting out the amount and spatial location for all renewables projects, balanced with other requirements such as food security, biodiversity, and landscape. How will this be taken forward?

The Environment Advisory Group of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership intends to consider this question.

4. Cllr Charlie Hicks, Oxfordshire County Council has asked the following question:

It appears that Officers are not following Oxfordshire County Council policies set out in the LTCP adopted in July 2022 in their criteria for the Review of Homes from Infrastructure Programme. When questioned on this point in FOP Scrutiny, senior Officers seemed to suggest that the policies that Officers are guided by in the Future Oxfordshire Partnership are those which were in place in 2017 when the Growth Deal was started, and that this is

unaffected by updates to any of the County Council's policies since then, including updates to the County Council's LTCP.

However, there are many references throughout the Growth Board papers from when it was set up that suggest the County Council's Local Transport Plan policies should be aligned to the work of the Growth Board/Future Oxfordshire Partnership. Which is right? Do the decisions on transport infrastructure, such as prioritisation of schemes made here in September 2022 in Agenda item 5c, need to align to the County Council's policies that have been adopted in July 2022 under the Terms of Reference of the Oxfordshire Growth Board? If not, please can it be specified where in the agreed arrangements of the Growth Board/Future Oxfordshire Partnership it states that policies set out in 2017 take precedent over more recently agreed council policies?

If the answer to the above questions is that existing County Council policies in the LTCP do matter for how decisions are made and projects prioritised in the Review of Homes from Infrastructure Programme, then I would expect to see this exercise re-run with updated criteria based on the latest agreed LTCP policies. Please can you let me know if this re-run of the prioritisation will happen?

Response

The proposals being presented for consideration around changes to the Homes from Infrastructure programme have been jointly produced by District, City and County officers, in an attempt to re-balance the programme and allow it to proceed.

The criteria for the Homes from Infrastructure (Hfi) programme were set out in the Housing and Growth Deal agreed with Government and have remained constant throughout the programme.

Broadly there are three criteria that successful schemes have to meet; these are:

- The schemes should be deliverable within the timescale - 5 years - of the Growth Deal.*
- The infrastructure scheme should accelerate already planned housing, such that it would come forward at a pace not previously programmed for by developers, within the 5 years of the Growth Deal.*
- The scheme should, in the view of the authorities concerned achieve value for money.*

It is these criteria that remain at the core of the assessment of schemes for the Hfi programme. Inevitably however, the assessment process is more nuanced than might be suggested by the terms of the Growth Deal.

The recent review did very much consider Active Travel but within the wider context of schemes delivering the accelerated housing.

It is not the case that OCC's LTCP and similar policy developments have not been factored into the review. Indeed, many of the schemes remain in the programme at least in part due to their Active Travel elements as opposed to purely the housing they will accelerate.

However, given we are now in the final year of the Housing & Growth Deal period the housing projected, the maturity of schemes and their ability to be delivered were also factors.

The proposals are also reflective of individual Councils' priority infrastructure considerations.

5. Dr Alison Hill on behalf of Cyclox has submitted the following address:

Thank you for letting me address this meeting of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership. I want to comment on the Growth Deal Schemes being agreed today, looking at them through the lens of the promotion of active travel, which is as you know a priority in the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, and is critically important in ensuring Oxfordshire meets net zero and achieves Vision Zero.

The list of proposed infrastructure investments currently under review give the original allocation and the proposed allocation. Looking at the changes it is clear that higher priority has been given to road schemes that will increase motor traffic. The percentage spent on active travel schemes has reduced from the original proposals. This goes against the LTCP policies and will embed car use for years to come. All councils have declared climate emergency. There is nothing to suggest that the proposals will do anything but increase carbon emissions.

We feel particularly aggrieved at the removal of plans for Woodstock Road which would have been the first truly safe cycling infrastructure along any of the Oxford major roads. The planning for the Woodstock Road scheme had significant stakeholder involvement. I was one of the stakeholders. The time and effort of many was wasted.

We are concerned too about the eye watering cost of the Oxpens Bridge, which we have long said is situated in the wrong place and should have been above Osney Lock. There are better ways to spend £8.8million to create safe routes for cycling, wheeling and walking from the west of Oxford across the Thames.

It is unclear how the remaining active travel schemes will result in an increase in active travel, as we have seen no modelling. They appear not to be considered as part of a county wide integrated cycle network.

Overall, we feel we that the process that has got you to the point of approving these schemes has been very opaque, has not involved stakeholders, and fails to address the policies of the LTCP.

Response

It is unfortunate that any scheme has had to see a proposed reduction or removal in its funding allocations but, as I'm sure we are all aware, inflation pressures across the construction sector have made this somewhat inevitable.

Higher priority has not been given to road schemes. Where priority has been given is to the criteria and metric which secured the funding – the acceleration of housing. However, Active Travel delivery is a positive criterion also and has played its part into the proposed increased allocation for Banbury – Tramway Road and other schemes.

The excellent work and principles established in the co-production exercise across Woodstock Road will not be lost but will inform and be built upon as we move forward with that and other schemes. Any scheme which sees a reduction or removal of funding remains vital and needed infrastructure and so a priority for all Councils.

With regard to the Oxpens Bridge, the bridge is a requirement of the Oxford Local Plan to ensure high quality active travel connections from the strategic redevelopment site at Osney

Mead and will support the proposed mixed-use redevelopment of brownfield sites in the west end, which will create a new quarter of the city, releasing over 1,000 new homes. Given their location the developments should be car free and so it is extremely important that this new quarter has excellent walking and cycling connectivity. The bridge forms an integral piece of this infrastructure which will also improve cycling and walking connectivity from other areas of the city to the train station and west end.

Locating the bridge at Osney Lock is unlikely to be a simpler or cheaper option given expensive and onerous works that would be needed for safe access ramps and the complex land ownership issues. In addition, the current proposed location will provide better connection to the city centre, train station and wider cycle network than the Osney Lock option. Assessment of likely trip flows undertaken by the County Council suggests that the bridge will be well used, particularly after the development at Osney Mead is brought forward.

6. Robin Tucker on behalf of CoHSAT has submitted the following address:

I am Robin Tucker, Co-Chair of CoHSAT, the Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel in Oxfordshire. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

We ask you to consider three things in your infrastructure decisions.

First, the elephant in the room. The £300m HIF1 roads programme goes against County LTCP strategy and County, Vale, and South Oxfordshire climate policies because it will increase emissions both from construction (288k tonnes, Prof Whitelegg) and traffic increases. It is unwanted by CoHSAT member groups, and by all five Parish Councils on its route.

Further, every cost increase in HIF1 drives out schemes that have wider benefit. 10% on HIF1 is £30m – two or three other schemes gone. If costs go up further, you'll have to axe more schemes or drop parts of the HIF leaving a patchwork.

For the A40 corridor, the County Council considered five strategic options including bus lanes (the eventual choice) and light rail. We don't know if you as decision-makers have been presented with strategic options for this corridor – certainly we as the public have not. We think you should take a step back before it's too late and take a look at more sustainable and affordable options – just as you did for the A40.

Second, the collateral damage of cost increases seems to fall most heavily on the sustainable transport. Witness the proposed retention of dual carriageway schemes, but the dropping of Milton Heights Pedestrian and Cycle bridge and the massive cuts to the promising co-produced Woodstock Road scheme. That is completely the wrong direction if you want to achieve your traffic reduction and Climate Change targets for 2030 and 2040. You need to put active travel and bus priority schemes first.

Third, the Oxpens bridge, now rising in cost to a ridiculous £8.8m. We like investment in active travel, but we said for years that this is in the wrong place – too far south to be useful for either Osney Mead or Oxpens, and it doesn't connect to any useful routes to the city centre or station. This will be a white elephant. Instead, there should be a simpler cheaper bridge at Osney Lock and use the money saved to improve the ramps on Grandpont Bridge. This creates two more useful routes for people on the new developments and for existing residents.

Response

The HIF1 Didcot roads programme mentioned is an OCC programme of work and is separate from the Housing & Growth Deal programme. The budgets are also entirely separate and it is not true to say schemes within the programme being discussed today are at risk of removal if there are cost pressures identified in the HIF1 Didcot programme. The HIF1 Didcot programme will be subject to review and scrutiny as all other OCC programmes of work are. Similarly, the HIF2 programme of work along the A40 is again an OCC programme of work and while there is more of a combined delivery plan for this infrastructure with the Housing & Growth Deal programme – due to the geographic proximity - they are again separate programmes.

Active Travel was and remains a key consideration for schemes within this programme but within the constraints of what the money was originally secured to deliver – accelerated housing. It is unfortunate indeed that schemes may have to be removed from this programme to accommodate the unprecedented inflation pressures across the construction industry but even if a scheme is paused it remains a clear priority for all Councils and attempts to identify and secure alternative funding will again be a priority for all.

With regard to the Oxpens Bridge, the bridge is a requirement of the Oxford Local Plan to ensure high quality active travel connections from the strategic redevelopment site at Osney Mead and will support the proposed mixed-use redevelopment of brownfield sites in the west end, which will create a new quarter of the city, releasing over 1,000 new homes. Given their location the developments should be car free and so it is extremely important that this new quarter has excellent walking and cycling connectivity. The bridge forms an integral piece of this infrastructure which will also improve cycling and walking connectivity from other areas of the city to the train station and west end.

Locating the bridge at Osney Lock is unlikely to be a simpler or cheaper option given expensive and onerous works that would be needed for safe access ramps and the complex land ownership issues. In addition, the current proposed location will provide better connection to the city centre, train station and wider cycle network than the Osney Lock option. Assessment of likely trip flows undertaken by the County Council suggests that the bridge will be well used, particularly after the development at Osney Mead is brought forward.

7. Councillor Fouweather, Oxford City Council

Colleagues, you are making a vital choice about allocating precious public resource to deliver benefit for the people of Oxfordshire. I need to be able to tell residents in my ward that decisions including whether and to what extent to fund desperately-needed safety improvements to a key route in their community were taken on the basis of a genuine like-for-like assessment of need, a proper analysis of the schemes themselves, and genuine public engagement. At the moment, there is a danger of this process being seen as decisions made behind closed doors, without democratic oversight, without scrutiny, without opportunity for public comment, and on the basis of council leaders round this table going in to bat for their own favourite scheme rather than a proper comparison of cost, benefit and deliverability.

To reassure my residents, I would like answers to these questions:

Are you content that you have had the opportunity to evaluate the current proposal for the Oxpens-Osney bridge properly, given that informed commentators have pointed out the lack of synergy with for example the imminent improvements to connectivity through the re-design of the Botley Rd bridge, the competing claims of other possible locations nearer to Osney

Lock which were identified in the original Spatial Strategy, the lack of progress since the original 6m was allocated, the continued failure by the city council to re-open the Grandpont bridge which actually is part of the National Cycle Network linking South Oxford to the city centre, the issues around the bridge landing in floodplain, and the fact that it is right next to a perfectly good and well-used existing bridge?

Have you had the opportunity properly to compare the benefits of the Osney/Oxpens scheme with Milton Heights, which takes a significant and frankly terrifying barrier to active travel out of a key route?

Have you been properly able to factor in the various possible ways of using these funds to support improved active travel on Woodstock Road in my ward, including funding the scheme already paid for and consulted on through the Growth Deal, and/or allocating further funds to a wider North Oxford strategy to help support the impact of large development to the north?

Are you content to make this decision without the choices before you having been through the proper Scrutiny process?

Are you content to make this decision without opportunity for public involvement via Scrutiny, which there certainly would have been if you had published the papers on time?

My residents and I will be holding you to account for your answers to these questions.

Response

We acknowledge and regret the late submission of the paper to the Scrutiny Panel. There has been an opportunity for public involvement via the FOP meeting itself, and there will be a further opportunity when the proposed programme is taken to the Cabinet at Oxfordshire County Council.

We have commented on specific schemes and on the overall assessment criteria in response to earlier questions in this document and we refer the questioner to the replies above.

Schemes which cannot be delivered using funding from the Housing and Growth Deal thanks to the inflationary cost pressures remain worthwhile and important schemes, and officers will vigorously pursue alternative funding opportunities.