

In praise of partnerships

2017 was another very active year for the Society. We are particularly delighted that throughout the year our local authorities have worked more and more in partnership - as hoped for in our 2016 Annual Review.

The Society has continued to encourage this and especially to encourage the joint preparation of a county-wide spatial plan. We recommended such a plan in our seminal 2014 report *Oxford Futures* and have persistently encouraged it since then. Like grit in an oyster we may have been an irritant at the start but something of value could now emerge. Credit is due to the Oxfordshire Growth Board for making the progress it has made over 2017.

Government has now offered all the local authorities of Oxfordshire an additional £215m to facilitate affordable housing and enable associated infrastructure development. A condition of the funding is that all the County's authorities collaborate on the preparation of a joint, properly-coordinated, county-wide spatial development plan.

The Society's **Oxfordshire Futures Group** has welcomed this offer, which we hope the local authorities will accept. We see the joint spatial plan as a great opportunity to strengthen strategic planning processes. This could ensure proper coordination of housing and transport planning, so homes get built where good transport facilities are available, or can feasibly be provided, along with housing design excellence. Most importantly it is a great opportunity for public debate about growth and its distribution in a way which has not been possible during recent district and city local plan preparation and the strategic economic plan update of the Local Enterprise Partnership. The Futures Group is convinced that the proposed unprecedented levels of population and employment growth need not be a threat to rural Oxfordshire or historic Oxford. It can create high quality and affordable places in which to live and work if the strategic planning process is itself of high quality.

Linked to this the Futures Group also urged the integration of consultations into the plans of other local authorities involved in the development of the East-West Economic Corridor, ensuring that the voice of citizens is heard. The joint spatial plan will need to ensure that the Oxfordshire end of the Corridor is well planned. We hope this will **not** include an Expressway road through beautiful landscape - a rail-based solution would be preferable. This is linked to our continued promotion or at least consideration of rail-based rapid transit to complement bus rapid transit and the coherent development of the western side of the city centre, including Oxford station. An efficient, effective and sustainable transport framework is required. Our work on this has continued to be facilitated in 2017 by our membership of the West End Area Steering Group.



The Westgate Centre opened in October 2017, the biggest development in the city for decades Photo courtesy of Westgate Alliance

Throughout 2017 the Society continued to play an essential role in improving the quality of life through the place where people live. Civic societies are the country's most numerous participants in the planning system. We worked hard to support the consultations on the Oxford Local Plan in 2017 and submitted comments on all 100 or so preferred options. The **Planning Group's** assiduous monitoring of planning applications across the city continued with a strengthened team of volunteers which meets fortnightly in the City Council offices to do its work. **The map on the reverse of this review shows clearly the extent of this and other vital work.**

Similarly the Society's **Transport Group** continued to respond to consultations on transport matters and to undertake its own research. The group prepared a major report which discusses the nature of rapid transit, the advantages of bus or tram-based systems, their application to Oxford, the routes that have been suggested and the need for more detailed study. This addresses a gap in current city and county transport studies.

We launched a new group in 2017 - the **Housing Policy Group**. Housing is a critical issue in the city and county and the Group made an impressive start by commenting on the Government White Paper on housing as well as the Local Plan.



The Wytham Woods Blue Plaque unveiled this year

The work of these groups is reported upon and discussed in the Society's publications – the termly editions of *Visions*, supplemented with e-bulletins – and in our increasing use of our three websites and tweets. The **Communications Group** masterminds these and 2017 was an active year for them.

Through our **Programme Group** with its well-supported walks, talks and visits, we continued to promote and celebrate the best of what is inherited from the past and what is being developed for the future. The Society is also a store of knowledge and expertise about local places which is an essential starting point in recognising and strengthening their identity. This is reflected in our continued support for the **Blue Plaques** scheme and our engagement in discussions about the development of the **Oxford Museum** and how the County, University and City museums work together.

The national civic movement is also central to supporting and developing the sense of identity and belonging that comes from positive feelings about the place where people live. They are a fundamental source of civic pride. This work brings benefits to the whole community and not just to those who are members of civic societies. This is the *raison d'être* for our continued support of **Oxclean** and our enthusiastic support for its **Spotless Oxford** campaign.

Over the past few years we have broadened the scope of our interests to include environmental and social issues. Our work on these is facilitated by our membership of the Steering Group of the **Oxford Strategic Partnership** which was reconfirmed in 2017.

We also looked at ways in which the Society can be strengthened to support our work in all these areas. We would like to increase our **membership** and to broaden it so that it better reflects the demographic structure of the city and the city-region. Likewise we hope to increase our corporate membership and our links with residents associations. **We invite your help in all of these in 2018.** This is an important feature of our preparations for 2019 which will mark our 50th anniversary.

All in all, this has been a year of solid achievements on which to base our hopes for 2018. We have no paid staff and none of this would have been possible without the enthusiasm of our Executive Committee and Group members who work together to support us in many roles as a respected voice of Oxford residents. My warmest thanks go to them all.

Ian Green, Chairman

Clive Booth reports on the work of the Planning Group.

The Society's Planning Group meets fortnightly at the City Council's customer service centre at St Aldates to examine planning applications. In 2017, the City received almost **3,000 planning applications**. The Group selected 1,375 for scrutiny, usually because they potentially affected the public domain, not least in Conservation Areas, or threatened to disturb neighbours. The great majority of those scrutinised were unexceptionable. Only 128, about 9 per cent, were felt to require the Society's comment. **As the map shows, they were spread across all areas of the city.** Of the 128 we commented on, almost half were proposals for domestic extensions or new domestic buildings. A further third were for Houses in Multiple Occupation and a fifth for commercial and retail premises.

Applications from the universities and colleges required very few comments because the Society is increasingly invited to briefings before applications are submitted and is thus able to understand and influence projects' formative stages. The Design Review Panel is a particularly important force for good design.

We were impressed by the proposals for a major new building within the precincts of **Wadham College** and an ambitious design for the redevelopment of the **New College** site on Savile Road. We were delighted that the proposals affecting the precious **Manor Place** site, lying between Magdalen Deer Park and Holywell Cemetery, were rejected on appeal and we hope that the University and Merton College can collaborate to locate much-needed postgraduate residential accommodation there. Finally, following many objections including ours, the proposal to close the much-loved **Cellar Night Club** in Frewin's Court was withdrawn.

Housing

Peter Thompson, our former Chairman, is Coordinator of this new group and reports on its first year.

2017 saw Oxford's housing crisis worsen, with no signs of the social and economic consequences of astronomic house prices abating. But there was no shortage of consultations and reports on how the problems could be addressed. The Group contributed formal responses to the Government White Paper *Fixing our broken housing market* in February, responded to the 'Preferred Options' stage of the new Oxford Local Plan preparation in August, and to the Government follow-up to its White Paper, *Planning the right homes in the right places* in September. We also circulated several papers by high-profile individuals and organisations advocating their own solutions to the problems, though none addressed all 20-plus factors contributing to the crisis. 2018 should be a busy year!

On a more constructive note, the Barns Road development in Cowley (shown here) was nominated for a Civic Trust design award. This provides 40 attractive modern flats, as well as accommodation for the charity Emmaus, releasing the site previously occupied in Northway. Some bright new apartments are thus nearing completion here while, not far away, the first phase of Barton Park is emerging fast from the winter mud. All these provide insights into the shape of Oxford's future development.



Walks, talks and visits

Almost 1,000 places were taken on the 24 events run by our Programme Group, as Terry Bremble reports.

Nine **public talks** drew big audiences to hear about a wide range of issues from modern-day policing in Oxford to library buildings and lessons from both Cambridge and Freiburg.

The 15 **visits and walks** threw a spotlight on some aspect of our unique city. College and University visits were as popular as ever (Wolfson, Exeter Cohen Quad, Lady Margaret Hall, Worcester College gardens, the Mathematics Institute and Islamic Studies Centre). For enthusiasts of science and technology we visited the Harwell campus Rutherford labs, Seacourt Printers and the Ardley facility that generates electricity from our rubbish. Aston Eyot delighted nature lovers while tours of Headington Quarry, 'Nuffield island', Bartlemas Chapel, Witney's historic centre and the University Church pleased all with a love of our heritage.



Witney's wool trade is still evident

Photo courtesy of Pauline Massey

Oxfordshire Futures

The Oxford (now Oxfordshire) Futures Group was launched in 2015 to implement the recommendations of our 2014 *Oxford Futures report**. Ian Green reports on the group's work.

The report noted that while the Oxford city-region has the potential to become a key driver of the regional and national economy in the 21st century, the city and surrounding district councils and the county council were struggling to work effectively together.

In 2017 the group focused attention on:

Devolution

We were disappointed at the decision of Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council to submit a proposal (known as *Better Oxfordshire*) for a Unitary County Council to the Secretary of State for local government. The proposal was radical, involving abolition of the city and district councils but the political and administrative structures which would replace them was not spelt out.

The OFG view was that a proposal which was not fully thought through and which was supported by only three of the six local authorities comprising Oxfordshire did not demonstrate the capacity to deliver the benefits of devolution. We have continued to lobby the Oxfordshire Growth Board and are delighted that it is now working more effectively as a partnership – perhaps there is now no need for the radical Better Oxfordshire proposals?

Transport

Andrew Pritchard reviews the year's major themes.

We contributed to the battle over **buses in Queen Street** and were pleased both that some buses will continue to use it for at least 18 months and also that the City Council will review access to the new **Westgate Centre** later this year. The lack of any easy pedestrian crossing of Castle Street from the Westgate to the Castle development and the facilities provided for cyclists are less satisfactory.

We contributed to the Society's response to the emerging **Local Plan** which promotes walking, cycling and public transport as the main methods of movement, but felt that it lacked any strategy. Following this, we took part in two workshops on proposals for a **City Centre Movement and Public Realm Strategy**. The proposed strategy did not offer viable solutions for bus routes nor did it consider possible alternative modes of travel, though some degree of demand restriction (workplace charging or congestion charging) was assumed.

We feel strongly that any such local strategy must be looked at as part of transport plans for the whole of central Oxfordshire, in view of the large number of commuters into the city. This could be part of the Oxford Infrastructure Strategy, in which the District Councils will be looking at all the LEP's proposed development corridors together.

We pointed out the many defects of the latest plans for the **station area**, and Network Rail's dissatisfaction with the proposals. We agreed with the bus companies' concerns over poor **interchange** between rail and bus. We noted that rail electrification to Oxford has been pushed into the 2019-2024 period, when it will have to compete with other such schemes.

An Oxfordshire spatial growth plan

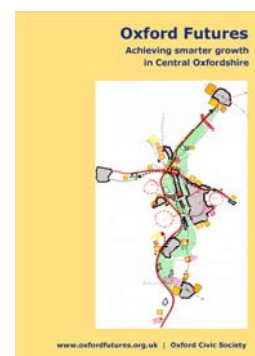
The OFG has strongly supported the agreement to prepare a county-wide spatial plan.

Through the OFG, the Civic Society continued to lobby the Oxfordshire Growth Board on the importance of such a plan and public debate in the course of its preparation.

The group is convinced that the proposed unprecedented levels of population and employment growth need not be a threat to rural Oxfordshire or historic Oxford. Working effectively in partnership the authorities with support from groups such as ours can create high quality and affordable places in which to live, work and play, if the strategic and detailed planning is itself of high quality.

As the geographic focus of this group is the city-region and the county, membership is open to amenity groups from Oxfordshire.

**Oxford Futures: achieving smarter growth in Central Oxfordshire*, Oxford Civic Society, 2014
www.oxfordfutures.org.uk



Richard Dodd, Hon Treasurer, reports on a successful year.

A pause in the Society's project work in 2017 resulted in a significant reduction in both overall expenditure and income compared with 2016. Otherwise expenditure and income, from both corporate and individual members, were broadly similar to 2016. However, we expect a reduction in income in 2018, as a result of the unanticipated need to move to new banking arrangements.

Once again the **programme of visits and walks** attracted high numbers of attendees, providing sufficient funds to cover the 2017 programme of **free talks**. We maintained our financial support of the **Blue Plaques** scheme, increased our promotion of **OxClean**, and sponsored the One World Festival held at the **Ashmolean Museum** in November. **Working group** activity increased during the year, particularly with the establishment of a housing group, resulting in slightly higher associated costs.

2017 figures at a glance

Income	Expenditure
Total: £17,529 (£23,920 in 2016)	Total: £15,378 (£21,950 in 2016)
- Subscriptions £10,202	- Newsletter £3,421
- Programme £5,205	- Programme £1,948
- Gift Aid £1,406	- Talks £2,174
- Other £716	- Website £490
	- OxClean £1,179
Assets £37,920 (£35,768 in 2016)	- Oxford Futures £150
	- Corporate events £924
	- Blue Plaques £519
	- Donations & subscriptions £1,580
	- Other costs £2,993
	Surplus £2,151 (£1,970 in 2016)

Our **asset base** has been strengthened by a year-end surplus similar to that of 2016 and we continue to seek ways to put this to best use to fulfil our aims and serve our community. Our assets are on deposit with the CCLA Interest Fund for Charities. Our policy is to hold in reserve sufficient to cover our liabilities and to enable us to take professional advice on planning and other issues as needs arise. The full accounts are on the website, or please contact me for a copy: treasurer@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

On message

The Communications Team keeps members in touch and raises key issues with opinion formers.

Our main activities were running the Society's four **websites** and **twitter accounts**, as well as publishing **Visions**. Having re-launched the websites in 2016, we focused on adding content to reflect all the work that the Society undertakes. Good **press coverage** helped to raise our profile this year. We also organised an Open Day in North Oxford in July and the Society's presence at the One World Festival at the Ashmolean Museum in November.

Rosanne Bostock looks back at our 10th Spring Clean and other work designed to change attitudes to litter.

Our hugely successful **Spring Clean in March** was supported by nearly 80 groups from across the city and more volunteers than ever. Together the groups filled over 3,500 rubbish bags, removing over four tonnes of litter plus a lot of flytip from their local streets, public spaces and grotspots. The event again raised awareness that a cleaner and tidier city is a better place for us all.

Is the **anti-litter message** getting through? The amount of litter collected was 40 per cent down on last year and many groups reported seeing less litter. We are also proud of the way Spring Clean brings communities together for a common purpose. For example, Rose Hill and Iffley Low Carbon Group joined the Nepalese Community and the Rose Hill Residents Association to clean up Rose Hill and even made a video about their coming together to litter pick.

To help get the message across we kept in contact with **schools**, sponsored a **Don't just drop it, bin it banner** at the **Oxford United** ground and launched a new campaign, **Spotless Oxford**, with business-owner Jeremy Mogford. This aims to encourage shops, hotels, other businesses, schools and indeed all of us to clean up the pavement outside the premises.



About us / contacts

OCS is a society for people who care about Oxford, want to enjoy it more fully and help shape its future.

Our aim is an ever-improving quality of life in Oxford by working to influence planning, transport, the environment and community issues. New members are always welcome.

We are run by an Executive Committee whose members are elected at the AGM. See the website for the full list of members.

President: Sir Clive Booth
 Chairman: Ian Green
 Hon Secretary: Vernon Porter
 Hon Treasurer: Richard Dodd

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