



21 July, 2018

Oxford North Feedback
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Dear Sirs

Oxford North Public Consultation

Oxford Civic Society is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the proposals for Oxford North.

We recognise that the approved Area Action Plan (AAP) sets the context and parameters for this development. The proposals, though lacking in much important detail (see below), seem to us to be in many ways an enterprising interpretation of the AAP policies and they include many attractive features.

We do however have doubts about what may come to be seen as an out-dated concept, less attractive than other locations for similar development. Because of that, we are concerned that the commercial (office) development may take many years to be built out and occupied (the Oxford Business Park being an earlier example), and it is not at all clear that this location will be significantly different. This is a matter for concern not least because the shielding of at least some of the housing from the worst of the environmental conditions depends on the commercial developments proceeding at the same pace.

One of the frustrations of a consultation at this stage of planning is that the devil is in the detail and the detail is not on offer. However, the promoters score something of an own goal by describing the various aspects of their scheme at some length and only on the penultimate page refer to their claim that it accords with relevant national and local policies. This has invited a re-run of public objections to the City Council's Area Action Plan rather than comments on the merits of the promoter's interpretation of it. Except in relation to housing, we have tried to avoid that trap.

Housing

The AAP set what seemed to us to be a very unambitious target for the number of housing units for a city so desperately short of housing. Even so, the proposals do not meet the target. It is very regrettable that the opportunity to build housing on a much denser scale has been lost. The housing layouts seem very odd and deserve to be re-thought. Some have public space and presumably access, at the front (from a road), which is a good feature. Others have public space abutting private rear gardens. We think that this will create problems.

Parks

One of the attractive features of the development is the inclusion of three parks and a lot of greenery in the proposed street layouts and site boundaries. But how much of these are to be accessible to the public and who will have responsibility for their maintenance and its funding? There is no mention of this. These areas could end up as unloved brown spaces - because the property of everyone is the property of no-one.

Cycling

Oxford is supposed to be a "cycling city". While making some provision for cyclists, the proposals do not live up to that title. They provide facilities only 'for the determined few'. There is nothing to make new riders feel confident. We hope that the promoters will act on the recent Gilligan Report, "Running out of Road, Investing in Cycling in Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford", produced for the National Infrastructure Commission.

On a detailed level, we are concerned that there are no protected paths over junctions. Also, the junction designs enable 'left-hook' crashes, which is not acceptable. The design offers no way to safely turn right from side roads. The design approach is thus a long way behind best Dutch practice. There needs to be clear, continuous priority for walking and cycling over side junctions.

Lastly, the developers have proposed an unsatisfactory route for cyclists to get to Oxford Parkway. This needs to be re-thought.

Highway design

While we welcome the decision to change the nature of the highways, the proposals do not go as far as to achieve best practice. The inactive facades are a lost opportunity. The dreadful inactive facades of the new Westgate Centre on Thames Street Oxford surely make this point! The 2014 Planning Practice Guidance from 2014, 'Design', explains how to make more attractive places of roads with a high traffic function, by using service roads which enable active frontages. A Boulevard with a separate side road is the answer here, and the cycle provision should be taken along the service road.

Highway Network

Many of the public comments on transport refer to the 'inadequacy' of the highway network in the area. However the promoters are correct in pointing out that the technical assessment of the Area Action Plan provided evidence that the proposed network could accommodate the additional traffic generated by the development without building the so-called Loop Farm link road (west of the A34) – however desirable, or not, that road might be in itself.

Rat run

The promoters propose a 20mph speed limit and some shared space treatment of the 'central street' that links the A40 and A44 within the development. While the shared space approach is good, it is likely to be completely undermined by the incentive for motorists to use this link as a 'rat-run' to and from Peartree in order to avoid queues at the Wolvercote roundabout. This shared space will need to be designed to strongly deter motorists from "rat-running" and there must be a restriction on HGVs using the link (forcing them to continue to travel via the roundabout instead) to make a reality of the sort of environmental quality that is being aimed for within the development.

Car parking

Apart from a brief reference to 'parking management', there is absolutely nothing said on the subject of car parking – it is as if a page of the prospectus has been omitted! No information is provided on the anticipated modal shares, origins or destinations of the generated trips. The Area Action Plan allows for up to 1,740 spaces for the employment element of development on the site (for comparison purposes, 70% more than the Peartree P&R car park) and yet we have not seen any indication of how many are now being proposed nor where or how these are to be physically accommodated. A similar comment applies to the residential element of the scheme – the artist's impression of the Canalside development for example is conspicuously devoid of cars!

Conclusion

All the above observations are offered in a constructive spirit. As we said at the start of this letter, the scheme seem to us to be in many ways an enterprising interpretation of the AAP policies and includes many attractive features.

We frequently meet developers in pre-application meetings and hope that there will be an opportunity to do so on this very important project.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clive Booth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Sir Clive Booth
President

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