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## Hoping for the best ...



*A new humanities centre is being planned at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter where it will occupy the site between the Blavatnik School of Government and the Mathematical Institute. If it goes ahead, it will bring many benefits to the whole city. See the story on page 3.*

*Photo courtesy of the University of Oxford*

### **Joined-up planning has never been more vital than now as our post-Covid-19 economic recovery continues.**

One of the Society's main aims is to influence the development of Oxford as a city where people enjoy living, working and visiting. This calls for an understanding of how the development of the whole city region is being planned.

This is not an easy task. The regulations underpinning strategic planning (planning across administrative boundaries) are in a state of flux and this affects current planning activities within and around the city and county. The latest *Planning for the Future* White Paper does not help: it seldom mentions strategic planning and it proposes removing one of the few strategic planning tools available.

Alongside 'routine' planning, post Covid-19 economic recovery planning continues. Measures to support the city and county's economy through a three-year period of recovery are being developed and implemented, in line with central government recovery agendas. It is no surprise that while some local economic sectors are thriving and creating employment, other sectors have been badly affected. Professional services, information and communication, manufacturing and real estate are bouncing back. Distribution, transport, accommodation and food, entertainment and recreation will

be slower to recover. Hospitality and retail have had extreme difficulties with the absence of international tourists and, until recently, students. Businesses in the city centre have been hard hit and some will not recover. Vacant properties are being re-purposed, helped by recent changes in planning regulations, although care is needed to ensure appropriate uses for the spaces available.

Whatever the trajectory of the post-Covid economic recovery here, **it's vital to ensure that the future distribution of jobs and homes is well planned.** With this in mind, we have continued to develop the concept of a **metropolitan transport system** for central Oxfordshire – a concept which could help to ensure that growth is good for the economy, environment and all local people. City-region transport-oriented development planning, integrating different types of public transport with land use planning is being implemented elsewhere in England and we are drawing on this experience. We are now promoting *metroisation* (as it is called elsewhere) with planning bodies in the region (see page 7).

Ideally, *metroisation* will be a basic component of the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan. This Plan is being prepared as part of an agreement with central government which requires that the Oxfordshire local planning authorities and the County

# Hoping for the best ... (continued)



*Pylons at Sandford. Infrastructure such as this must be planned for alongside new development.*

*Photo © Mat Fascione (cc-by-sa/2.0)*

Council produce a 'joint statutory spatial plan' which will act as a planning framework to support sustainable growth across the county to 2050.

Linked to this is the **Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy** (OxIS) update. The OxIS update was commissioned by the Oxfordshire Growth Board and involves the county's local authorities and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership. As in the 2017 original OxIS, the update includes: transport; education; health and adult social care; emergency services; utilities; waste; flood defences and drainage; and green infrastructure. It is an enormous scope to cover in the limited time it has available to provide useful information for the next steps of Oxfordshire 2050 Plan preparation. The County Council is also preparing a county-wide Local Transport and Connectivity Plan which will provide inputs to the Oxfordshire Plan (including it is hoped, *metroisation*).

The results of OxIS Stage 1 will be available for public consultation in January 2021 and will include re-prioritised infrastructure schemes to 2040. The schemes will be based on the spatial distribution of housing and employment as in the current Local Plans of the District and City Councils. Stage 2 will use the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan preferred spatial distributions of employment and housing when they are available later in 2021.

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We are particularly interested in how **investment in infrastructure** will be re-prioritised. Previous methods need to be refreshed as, since the original OxIS, climate change has been declared an emergency and inclusivity in Oxfordshire is now acknowledged as a major problem. These now need to be higher priorities.

Bringing these components together is a very difficult task especially as there is also concern that the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan may go the way of the West of England Joint Spatial Plan – this plan was withdrawn before approval, after years of preparation. It was withdrawn because the tools available to the Planning Inspectors were not appropriate for a Joint Spatial Plan which is at a higher strategic level of planning than catered for in current legislation. It is possible that central government will not wish to deal with this problem, in Oxfordshire or elsewhere, while also dealing with the *Planning for the Future* White Paper (which, as noted, largely ignores strategic planning).

There is an additional challenge to strategic planning – **devolution**. Government announced a Devolution White Paper earlier this year and one of the possibilities is that some shire counties will be enlarged and made unitary authorities. Although the White Paper has now been postponed the prospect in Oxfordshire re-awakened divisive arguments. The County Council and Cherwell District Council recently published a paper which presented a cost-efficiency argument to promote a unitary county approach. The City Council and West Oxfordshire District Council responded quickly with firm disagreement.

**Implicit in a single unitary county council approach is the abolition of the City Council and District Councils.** But there are alternative approaches which could build on existing duty-to-cooperate arrangements within Oxfordshire and which facilitate relevance, accountability to communities and effectiveness as well as efficiency. We will be putting these ideas forward when the delayed White Paper eventually emerges. We will be looking for an approach which will ensure an optimal blend of taking responsibilities as close to communities as possible with local community involvement on the one hand and economies of scale on the other. Such an approach could also strengthen strategic planning.

*Your views on this would be much appreciated – see the back page for contact details.*

Ian Green

Chairman





# A cultural boost at the ROQ

## Professor Karen O'Brien, Head of Humanities, University of Oxford

**A proposed new humanities centre at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter will re-shape the city's cultural landscape.**

The Radcliffe Observatory Quarter site has a lot of meaning for me. I grew up and studied nearby and frequently took my children to the Radcliffe Infirmary when they were little. Now, my office is in that same building and recently I was proud to support putting up a plaque to the nurses and doctors who worked there over centuries, helping countless families like mine. I am also proud to be overseeing the proposed addition of an exciting new building to the site: the **Schwarzman Centre** for the Humanities.

The proposed Centre has been made possible by a £150 million donation to the University and represents a major boost to the teaching and study of the humanities. For the first time in our history, we will bring together a number of disciplines that are currently scattered across the city, including English, history and music. The new space will be designed to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and will provide new libraries. Academics will tackle vital questions such as the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, the environment and how we rebuild society after the pandemic.

Importantly, the Centre will also benefit the wider community. It will include a new space for our academics to engage with thousands of schoolchildren through **outreach activities**.

The public will be encouraged to visit the Centre's **exhibition space** and three **performance venues**: a 500-seat concert hall, a 250-seat theatre and a 100-seat 'Black Box' lab for experimental performance. These will host a wide range of music, drama and performances from world-renowned musicians and performing artists, and local, national and international groups.

A new **cultural programme** will allow us to use performance to bring our research to new audiences. We are already working with and extending funding to cultural partners within the city to build this programme and to ensure that we collaborate for the benefit of all.

If we are to create a building for the whole city, **we need to hear the views of Oxford residents** before we lay a brick in the ground. We are now undertaking an initial **public consultation** with a second one in the first half of 2021, when we will provide more details, including initial designs, before bringing forward a planning application.

Please visit the site to view our hoardings with more information and images, and send feedback to [consultation@humanities.ox.ac.uk](mailto:consultation@humanities.ox.ac.uk) or phone 01865 615361. If all goes well, we look forward to welcoming you to the Centre in the academic year 2024/25. Read more at [www.schwarzmancentre.ox.ac.uk](http://www.schwarzmancentre.ox.ac.uk)

## Keith Holly's legacy

### Peter Thompson writes

**Thanks to the generosity of the late Keith Holly we have a wonderful opportunity to build on his enthusiasms.**

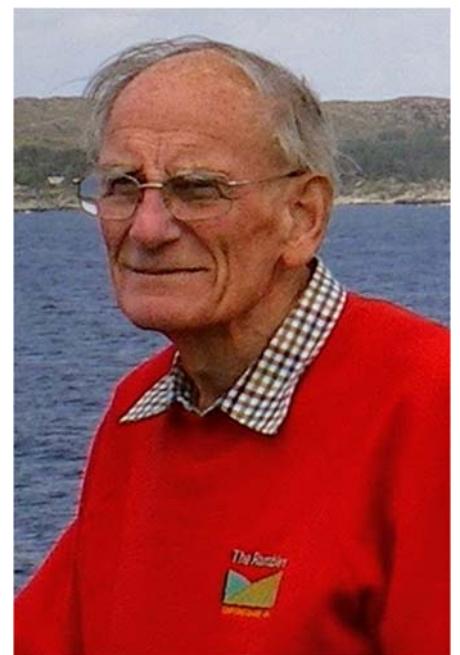
In our last issue we reported the sad death at the age of 93 of Keith Holly, a long-time member of OCS and dedicated walker and defender of Oxford's open spaces, particularly Warneford Meadow. We dropped a hint that Keith had made some legacy provisions and we can now reveal that we have received the generous legacy of £20,000 from Keith's estate.

We have been discussing with Oxford Pedestrians Association how the money could be put to best use, in a practical way which would promote Keith's interests in walking and enjoyment of Oxford's outdoor opportunities, and at the same time celebrating his memory.

A number of interesting ideas have already been suggested, including projects in the city as well as footpath connections to the beautiful surrounding countryside. No decisions have yet

been made so **we would be pleased to hear your suggestions**, especially from anyone who knew Keith and perhaps shared his enthusiasms.

If you would like to contribute ideas, please contact us by email [info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk) or phone (see back page).



# The Planning White Paper: our views

## Louise Thomas reports

**The Government White Paper on planning is meant to reform a system that is acknowledged to be creaking. But is it more of a threat to democracy than an improvement?**

Since August 2020, the Government's *Planning for the Future* White Paper has been under the spotlight. Many viewpoints, summaries and webinars about it are now available, which is a reflection of how radical the proposals are and how they have been received by the planning, development and civic communities. Peter Thompson has led the Society's analysis of the White Paper, which is summarised here.

With the express aim of building 300,000 new homes per year, the White Paper describes the current planning system as inefficient, opaque, slow, complex and relying on discretionary decisions, rather than a rules-based process. Few might argue with this description, although why we have ended up with this system is another discussion to have.

In its place, the White Paper proposes a streamlined central government-led approach using three categories of land: Growth, Renewal and Protected areas. Default national development management policies, design codes, infrastructure levy terms and a standard method for determining housing figures will inform new Local Plans. These plans will enable local authorities to allocate their 'nationally-determined, binding housing requirement'.

These all-singing all-dancing Local Plans must encompass all matters that local communities would wish to see defined for new development in the three areas, as this process would also grant **automatic planning permissions** to proposals that conform with the Local Plan. **This aspect of the White Paper is perhaps the most simplistic and hence worrying.** With a 30-month time limit on producing new Local Plans, a vast investment is required to rebuild local authorities' resources, skills and expertise, alongside new technology to enhance civic engagement.

*A substantial development at St Nicholas Place, Littlemore. In future we might not be able to object to new development if it meets the criteria and guidelines in the Local Plan.*

*Photo courtesy of Clive Booth*



Greater use of data is planned to support decision-making, open access and engagement using the UK's 'prop tech' sector\*. The aspiration is to 'make it easier for people to feed in their views into the system through social networks and via their phones'. Unfortunately there are too many examples of easy technology fixes and poor public sector IT investments failing to deliver the goods for this to be easy to envisage.

With the new Local Plans, there is a drive to 'ask for beauty', fast-tracking proposals to receive automatic permissions 'where they reflect local character and preferences'. Design guidance and codes are to be locally prepared based on community involvement, with a chief officer for design and placemaking in each local authority. But there is no discussion of the resources which would be necessary to do this.

We welcome a new Infrastructure Levy that will aim to raise more revenue than at present from developer contributions for infrastructure and affordable housing, including sharing the uplift in land values. But a quicker, simpler framework to assess 'environmental impacts and enhancement opportunities', is cold comfort given the very loose definitions of sustainable development currently applied to new development!

Regional planning, transport planning and the Duty to Cooperate between councils are worryingly omitted from the White Paper. Does this foretell proposals in the delayed *Devolution* White Paper? The countryside and natural world between housing developments have also been largely overlooked, yet the debate about what is protected or available for renewal there will be heated. Heritage sits uncomfortably too, especially non-designated heritage assets which could easily be overlooked in the rush to prepare new Local Plans. However, some ideas in the White Paper are potentially welcome - investment in skills and resources, giving planning back to town planning and urban design teams.

**Overall however the White Paper is full of verbiage on its good intentions, but massively deficient in detail, making it difficult to judge how it might work.**

*Thank you to all of you who took part in the lively debate in our webinar on the White Paper on 15 October.*

**The Society's full response to the White Paper is on the website – see [www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk)**

*Louise Thomas is a member of the Executive Committee, Director of the Historic Towns and Villages Forum and independent urban designer.*

*\*Property technology, the application of information technologies and platform economics to the property market.*

# Trending in Oxford ... in your street

## Gillian Coates updates us

Our Vice-Chair, Gillian Coates, has formally taken on the role of coordinator of the Planning Group. Here she explains how the group is enhancing its work and looks at trends in planning applications.

As this issue of *Visions* shows, there is much going on that impacts on planning in the city. As the new Co-ordinator for the Planning Group I have been assessing our activities and formulating a strategy that enhances our effectiveness, increases our profile and extends our networking capabilities. Many elements of planning impact on individuals and the group aims to consult and involve those who have an interest in the future of our city and its environs. We also aim to establish and enhance links with those with legal responsibility to oversee and enact planning and development projects.

The Planning Group is a very active body whose membership has increased over the year. But we are always looking for **new volunteers** who have an interest in maintaining the integrity of the city's future development. The **scrutiny of planning applications** and raising objections to inappropriate proposals is still a vital part of our work. We have now created an archive for our submitted comments to the City Council's planners to enable us to assess our impact on planning decisions, monitoring our performance to check we are in line with current thinking and trends. At the end of this calendar year we will produce figures for the year.

### Getting it right from the start

But our work goes beyond mere scrutiny as we are actively involved with **pre-application consultations**. Such is our reputation for reasonable and fair-minded views and a feel for the heritage of our city, that many developers and architects seek our opinion before submitting applications. On many occasions our intervention at an early stage has avoided failure at the first post and has perhaps improved design. Recently we have been consulted on the proposed new hotels on Abingdon Road and the Boswell building; the new library at Corpus Christi; and an innovative development in East Oxford.

### Trends in planning applications

We have detected a significant increase in the number of applications for the change of use from a dwelling house (traditionally occupied by a family) to a **House in Multiple Occupation (HMO)**. In part this may reflect the housing needs of young working people for whom renting a room in a shared house is the only option. Our concerns are to ensure the quality and size of units and the impact on a neighbourhood. Many HMOs meet the regulations (size and facilities) but frequently they are on the margin of comfort.



*Student residences on Iffley Road, built for Wadham College. Some such developments are built speculatively. Photo courtesy of Clive Booth*

In Oxford HMOs historically provided accommodation for students living outside college provision but increasingly both universities are building their own accommodation. We are concerned about **speculative student accommodation** developments which may prove to be superfluous. If developers can build speculatively for students, what prevents them from building for the resident community of key workers who are struggling to find affordable homes?

Coming a close second to HMOs are applications for **extensions and the conversion** of garages, sheds and outbuildings, to provide extended living accommodation. Our concerns are to ensure that extensions fit with the streetscape and do not impact negatively on adjacent buildings or the quality of life of neighbours. We also need to be watchful of conversion of garages and outbuildings as some have the capacity to morph into a separate dwelling, an HMO, or an Airbnb. A cynical view perhaps, but one that has some foundation.

### The White Paper

Over the last few months much of our work has focused on preparing a response to the Government's White Paper on planning. The outcome of this work is summarised by Louise Thomas on page 4.

In connection with this work, members of the group have consulted other organisations (Civic Voice, Oxfordshire Community Land Trust, Place Alliance) and participated in numerous webinar sessions. Our own webinar (15 October) provided members with the opportunity to debate our response and to suggest further argument that would enhance our submission. **A consensus is emerging that the White Paper is rushed, badly-timed and not fit for purpose.** If this policy is enacted any local control of planning will be lost and we could find the landscape of our beautiful city blighted in the future.



# Only connect

## Andrew Pritchard reports

The Transport Group has submitted comments on new proposals affecting cycling and transport connectivity while also looking at the future of rail.

### Emergency Active Travel Fund

This funding was made available by central government in response to the pandemic, aiming to encourage more walking and cycling in a post-Covid world. We have been disappointed in the results of the spending of the first tranche of this fund. The promised cycle path improvements have been largely cosmetic and in the case of the Abingdon Road have produced a less safe road for cyclists.



In our response to consultation on Tranche 2 we concentrated mainly on the **proposed bus gates**, urging that the correct data were collected before they were installed, so that their effects on pollution, bus speeds, traffic patterns and numbers could be assessed. We were keen that they were installed for long enough to assess their effects throughout the year. However

we understand that the project has now been postponed. When it is reconsidered we hope that impact assessments will have been done to allow more rigorous decision making.

### Future of Connectivity Oxfordshire 2050

In our response to this Open Thought\* consultation we commented that more attention needed to be given to the reasons and needs for connectivity, not just the means of connectivity in isolation. Many good examples of how to reduce pollution and congestion already exist in continental Europe and it would be easier to implement these if transport were the responsibility of a local Transport Authority.

We liked the idea of 'transit-oriented development' (essentially putting new development close to good public transport) to reduce the need for personal transport. However the improvement of services in rural Oxfordshire needs the reinstatement of facilities such as libraries, banks and so on rather than relying on technological solutions alone.

### Strategic rail planning

The Group has prepared a document entitled *Next steps on rail* setting out our views on the future role of rail in central Oxfordshire, and this is summarised on the opposite page.

We are still awaiting the publication of the full text of the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study Phase 1, to see how this fits in with our own ideas of a north-south 'Spine Line'. There is some confusion in discussions between the idea of a purely heavy rail-based 'Metro', and the idea of 'Metroisation' put forward by Nick Falk of URBED, and a member of the Group, in a recent webinar. Metroisation includes the whole network of transport means, whether cycle, bus, heavy or light rail (trams) and, crucially, it means joint planning of both transport and other development.

On top of this we learnt that Oxford station is one of six initial case studies put forward by Network Rail as part of a 'Project Speed', aiming to cut delivery times and costs, though little detail has been given. However, all rail lines through Oxford are now proposed for electrification by 2050 as part of Network Rail's decarbonisation aims.

### Street design standards

We are grateful to a member for drawing our attention to a summary sheet *Street design standards – current and with-drawn practice* recently published by the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Urban Design Group. This includes many changes which we have in the past recommended in local road and transport design, and we look forward to being able to use this to support our views on such schemes.

*\*Oxfordshire Open Thought* was set up to gather local opinion on the *Oxfordshire Plan 2050*. It's backed by all the local councils and the County Council and by the Growth Board. The deadline for comments on the plan has now passed but the initiative continues to collect opinion on other major issues. We welcome this initiative and urge members to give their views on topics of interest:

[www.oxfordshireopenthought.org/](http://www.oxfordshireopenthought.org/)

### Taming the traffic – watch our new video

Spurred on by the Connecting Oxford initiative we took advantage of the first lockdown in spring to film some of the city's most stunning spaces without their usual traffic. In the resulting video, Ian Green makes the case for showcasing our unique heritage for what it is, by further restricting traffic on the High Street, Broad Street and St Giles and encouraging more walking, cycling and public transport.

The video, **Taming the traffic in city streets**, is now on our website, alongside our other short films and webinars – see [www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/videos/](http://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/videos/)

# Next steps on rail

## Nigel Fulford reports

The Transport Group welcomes some bold new thinking about the contribution rail could make to our city region.

The **promotion of an expanded role for rail** in central Oxfordshire has been a consistent aim of the Group. We primarily seek to ensure that the relevant planning processes pursue opportunities to make best use of rail as part of a multi-modal network that supports sustainable travel within the city region. The planning processes include the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP5), and the rail industry's route-planning Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS).

### Working towards 'metroisation'

Key to the achievement of our objectives is to **encourage more local travel by train**, aided by more local stations and more frequent passenger services. Some people – including the Chairman of Network Rail – call this 'metroisation'.

Our **Spine Line proposal** focuses on improving local accessibility linked to planned developments in the north-south corridor through Oxford, between Langford Lane/Oxford Airport in the north and Milton Park in the south. Additional local stations would be opened and the existing branch line, currently used only by freight trains, reopened for passenger trains to serve new stations at the Oxford Science Park and Cowley, a series of multi-modal 'hubs' connecting train, bus and other services including cycling. We have worked with our good friend Dr Nick Falk of the URBED Trust to promote the concept.

### Service improvements under consideration

The **Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS)** led by Network Rail, set up in 2018, has included a strategic analysis of how the rail system can best support economic growth in Oxfordshire, covering passengers and freight traffic. It contains new train service proposals, for which significant investment will be needed to provide additional network capacity between Didcot East Junction and Oxford North Junction.

The additional capacity will be used principally for an increase in medium and longer distance inter-urban services, including East – West Rail which is now under construction between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Bedford.

These new services, as they make station calls within central Oxfordshire, will provide more frequent services at the main stations for passengers on short journeys. This meets the study's specification for four trains per hour between main stations, but does not provide the level of service at local stations in our Spine Line proposals. Interventions with a satisfactory business case are expected to be progressed through the Department for Transport's Rail Enhancements Pipeline.

### What do we want to deliver through rail?

Make the best use of rail to:

- support prosperity and employment for a growing population
- reduce congestion on central Oxfordshire's roads
- reduce the environmental costs caused by road transport
- increase opportunities for leisure travel in central Oxfordshire

### What will happen at Oxford station?

The **provision of additional platforms at Oxford station** is critical to any significant expansion of train services through Oxford. The City Council, Network Rail, the County Council and the Oxford LEP have appointed the design, engineering and project management consultancy Atkins to bring together a masterplan for Oxford station. Atkins will look at redevelopment of the station area, including a multi-modal transport interchange, rail capacity upgrades, an improved station forecourt and better connectivity with other key developments in the city centre. Network Rail have recently announced, as part of their 'Project Speed' initiative, that Oxford is one of six projects nationally to be piloted for faster implementation.

### How can we all contribute to achieving our aims?

Bridging the gap between what we aim to achieve and what is likely to emerge through the planning processes will need committed political leadership and community support. If we are to bridge the gap then we need to be clear on the ideas and promote them to politicians, council officers and the community. If you support the ideas, please spread the word!

*Nigel Fulford is a member of the Transport Group and has a background in senior management in the railway industry.*

*A London Overground train on the Gospel Oak - Barking line. Running on an electrified railway through Oxford, trains such as these could be fitted for Oxfordshire use, including plenty of space for cycles.*

*Photo courtesy of the Railway Gazette*



# Planning for a green recovery

## Chris Church reports

**Many central and local governments are planning for a post-Covid future by going greener. We all have a role to play too.**

When *Visions* covered climate change issues in 2019 no one would have expected global carbon emissions to fall by 8% in the next few months. That is what has happened – albeit at a tragic cost – as a result of the Covid pandemic. However this is at best a short breathing space, a chance to review and perhaps ‘reset’ what we are doing.

Governments all over the world are developing recovery plans. Climate-focused organisations are stressing that such plans must be both green and fair. The EU has played a lead role here, with a ‘green recovery plan’ that goes beyond simply reducing carbon footprints by moving toward ‘a climate neutrality pledge that prioritises the broader societal benefits of greener growth’.

Short-term priorities and the need to keep our economies thriving may make this difficult. Old-style economic views that ‘caring for the environment costs jobs’ still persist in some areas. So it is encouraging to see Boris Johnson talk recently of the “green industrial revolution that in the next 10 years will create hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of jobs”.

### A role for all of us

The challenge for all of us will be two-fold: to hold the government to account to make sure this happens and also to play our part and accept the changes we will all need to make. As the UK moves to zero carbon so we will be phasing out gas cooking and heating – something that may not please everyone. The independent Committee on Climate Change that advises the government has said that around two thirds of the policy changes needed to tackle climate change will also need behaviour change by all of us.



*What Walton Street might look like with a low traffic neighbourhood scheme. These have a role to play in reducing emissions by discouraging short journeys by car.*

*Image courtesy of Jericho LTN*

This conflict between personal and system change has been very obvious in Oxford this summer with disputes over bus gates and traffic management. Few would argue against cleaner air and faster bus journeys, but when these changes impact on the perceived convenience of being able to drive anywhere anytime, then attitudes change and we see the disputes that have erupted in Walton Street and elsewhere.

Change is often resisted. When it was proposed to close Cornmarket to traffic in the 1970s there was much opposition and claims that this was ‘the end for business in Oxford!’. Yet strangely we have survived and indeed have one of the lowest rates of unemployment in the UK. We need to recognise the need for change if we are serious about the climate crisis, to engage with and steer that change, and to deliver national and local action that is indeed both green and fair.

### The costs of going green

It’s not just transport. Oxfordshire faces up to 100,000 new homes in the next 11 years. While we may argue where these go or whether they are needed it is clear that each will be adding a little more to the climate problem, unless they are built to ‘zero carbon’ standards. Again we are told that to do this will be too expensive, but zero carbon homes recently built near Kingston Bagpuize include several for the Sovereign housing association delivered at costs that match those of ‘traditionally-built’ homes. It can and is being done – now we need to ‘scale up’.

Twenty years ago solar and wind power were prohibitively expensive. Now they are undercutting coal-fired power stations and continuing to get cheaper. This week it was announced that the world’s best solar power schemes now offer the “cheapest...electricity in history”. The clean energy revolution is happening around us.

It may seem like a difficult time. We have a pandemic to tackle, a climate crisis to resolve, a heritage and a countryside to protect, and a great city to care for. But as US public health leader John Gardner said in the 1960s: “We are faced with a series of great opportunities – brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems”. The Society offers us all a chance to help use those opportunities to create a greener future.



# A century of Oxford council housing

## Malcolm Graham investigates

Council housing in Oxford is celebrating its centenary this month as local historian, Malcolm Graham, discovers.

On 23 November 1920, Oxford's Mayoress, Mrs Florence Lewis, officially opened the city's first council houses on the Iffley Road estate. This estate and the larger Cowley Road estate, soon dubbed 'White City', were built as a result of the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act, generally known as the Addison Act after Dr Christopher Addison, the Minister of Health who saw it through Parliament. This Act was the first one to require, as opposed to permit, local authorities to meet housing need in their areas and it promised financial support for expenditure exceeding a penny rate. There was a degree of altruism behind the Act – these houses were to be 'Homes for Heroes' – as it was clear that poor housing had damaged the health of many wartime conscripts and fear of revolution helped to justify the expenditure.

Housing conditions in Oxford had been a matter of concern since the mid-19th century cholera epidemics. From the 1860s Christ Church built model dwellings in St Thomas's to replace old houses and the Oxford Cottage Improvement Company (OCIC) was founded in 1866 to restore and let old properties. These schemes did little to replace the cheap housing in the city centre that was being lost to commercial and university developments, and increasingly to slum clearance. Campaigners demanded municipal houses from the 1870s, but, like most English local authorities, Oxford was slow to intervene, preferring not to challenge private builders.

The Addison Act came at a time when the growth of the motor industry in Oxford was unforeseen and the Cowley factories remained outside the city boundary until 1929. Oxford City Council, a largely non-political local authority with a substantial minority of University councillors, was eventually persuaded to raise its initial target of 100 houses to 802.

The high cost of Addison Act houses led to the cancellation of the scheme in 1922 and later housing acts were less generous, offering local authorities fixed percentage subsidies for erecting council houses. Oxford's subsequent estates were designed in-house by the City Engineer to save architects' fees

*Henry Taunt photograph of Cowley Road's 'White City' council estate, 1921*

*Photo courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council*



*The official opening of the Iffley Road houses in 1920*

*Photo courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council*

and most were built by distant contractors who could out-bid local firms. There was now a clear political divide between Conservatives who saw housing essentially as a matter for private enterprise with councils providing only for the neediest while the Liberal and Labour parties had a universalist vision for council housing. Locally, private builders were slow to re-enter the house-building market and council houses accounted for 68% of the houses built in Oxford during the 1920s.

Following the extension of the municipal boundary in 1929, Oxford City Council, urged on initially by the Ministry of Health, envisaged building many more houses, but these plans fell victim to the financial crisis and changed government priorities. The council was redirected into housing for slum clearance and overcrowding, and private builders erected over 80% of the houses built in Oxford during the 1930s. Lower prices put these homes within the reach of regularly-paid workers, but the demand for cheaper rented property continued unabated.

By 1939, 'Homes for Heroes' had become subsidised housing for the less well-off. Oxford's council estates, predominantly in neo-Georgian style from the late 1920s, looked very different from the semi-detached, bay-windowed private estates and later 'slum clearance estates' could be seen to threaten the value of nearby properties. This was the certainly the view of the Urban Housing Company in the infamous Cutteslowe Walls saga, but the evolution of council housing perhaps reflected rather than intensified social segregation. It certainly provided genuinely affordable houses that private enterprise could not supply.

*This article is based on Malcolm's new book [Wholesome dwellings: Housing need in Oxford and the municipal response, 1800-1939](#)*

# Designs on Broad Street

## Ian Green invites your views

**Momentum is gathering to give Oxford a public space it deserves.**

Broad Street is broad because houses in the middle were removed in 1667 to improve the view of the Sheldonian Theatre, thus making the east end very wide. The Mileways Act of 1771 made the west end equally wide.

This broad street is very much an unrealised opportunity for the city. It partially functions as an informal public space, but the wide areas of carriageway largely occupied by on-street parking severely limits its potential. It could so easily be an "eccentric, dramatic and pivotal space."

These are the words of **Kim Wilkie**, the renowned landscape and urban designer appointed to prepare a Broad Street Plan in 2004. The Plan was paid for and brought together by people across town and gown, led by the Oxford Preservation Trust, the University, the Broad and Turl Street Colleges, the City and the County Councils, Historic England, the market traders and our Society.

The Plan proposed a clear, uncluttered space where the architecture can be seen and people can meet, linger and pass through at their own pace. Key features include: paving the eastern end as the University 'square'; opening the space outside the Weston Library as a café to animate the new square; and reconnecting the western end of the street within the framework of the Oxford Transport Strategy (this would now be the Connect Oxford proposals). The plan also proposed reducing the accumulated clutter of street markings, signs, furniture and lights to produce a clearer sequence of urban spaces, where the architecture can be enjoyed and pedestrians can feel comfortable. New trees in Parks Road, Holywell Street and surrounding Colleges would lean into the space to bring shade.

**Momentum is building to revive Kim Wilkie's vision.** The time is right, as improvement of the Broad Street public realm would contribute to city centre post-Covid economic recovery. Overall, there is a lack of designated, well-designed public space across the city centre where people can simply enjoy the time they spend in Oxford. There are few resting places for pedestrians and limited provision of seating, both private and public. To begin with, temporary measures could include removing the parking spaces, controlling loading and unloading hours for businesses needing access from Broad Street, but effectively making it car-free, day and evening. Spring 2021 could see its launch as a world-class piazza, with outdoor cafés, seating and event space. These temporary measures could be evaluated as Connect Oxford is refined and could become permanent – possibly leading to the abandonment of the prospect of a bus route through Broad Street and Holywell. What do you think? Please write to me at [chairman@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:chairman@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)



*Broad Street could be so much better than this*

*Photo courtesy of Ian Green*

## OCS Calendar

'Cut out and keep'

Online talks

Nov 2020 – March 2021

Wednesday 18 November 8pm  
**The railways of Oxfordshire** with railway historian **Laurence Waters**

Tuesday 12 January 8pm  
**Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum** with the Deputy Director of the garden, **Dr Chris Thorogood**



Thursday 4 February 8pm  
**How the planning system was captured by the property lobby** with local author **Bob Colenutt**

Tuesday 23 February 8pm  
**The Low Carbon Hub: powering a greener future** with CEO **Barbara Hammond**

Thursday 11 March 8pm  
**Managing Oxford in challenging times** with **Gordon Mitchell**

Thursday 18 March 6.30pm  
**AGM**  
*Join the talks by registering via our e-bulletins or email*  
[events@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:events@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

# Programme January – March 2021

## Talks online – all welcome

Talks are free, just tune in – and please help us to recruit new members by telling your friends

We think it's very unlikely that walks and visits will be possible in the first term of 2021. But our popular talks continue online, via Zoom, so that you can enjoy them in the comfort of your own home.

We will give you a link to each talk in the members' e-bulletin, shortly before the talk takes place. Register for the talk and we'll send an email with a link to it. (Non-members can email [events@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:events@oxcivicsoc.org.uk) to request the link.)

When you join the talk we'll explain the procedure for asking questions. Talks will usually be recorded and you can watch them afterwards via our website. Note, the audience is not visible during the talk.

### Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum: a resource, an inspiration

**Tuesday 12 January 8pm**

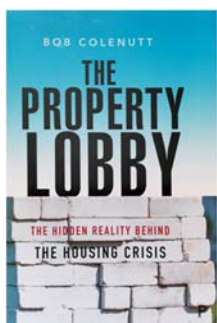
Thanks to a gift of £5,000 in 1621, Oxford acquired the first scientific garden in Great Britain which now hosts over 5,000 plant species. Gardeners' Question Time panellist and Deputy Director of the Botanic Garden, **Dr Chris Thorogood**, will explain its history and its role in research, conservation, education and public understanding. With accelerating global warming, what does the future hold?



### How the planning system was captured by the property lobby

**Thursday 4 February 8pm**

**Bob Colenutt** will explain how today's crisis in housing and the affordability of homes relates to the residential property development business and the behaviour of its participants. Bob, an OCS member and active member of the Housing Policy Group, is the author of a book described as 'the perfect guide' to the complexities of the housing market, *The Property Lobby*.



### The Low Carbon Hub: powering a greener future

**Tuesday 23 February 8pm**

Imagine the whole county being powered by an interconnected series of smart micro-grids centred around multiple small-scale, community-controlled renewable energy schemes. That is the vision of the Low Carbon Hub, a social enterprise that aims to prove we can meet our energy needs in a way that is good for people and the planet. The Hub's CEO, **Barbara Hammond**, will describe how the Hub is playing a central role in developing a smarter, flexible electricity system fit for our future.



### Managing Oxford in challenging times

**Thursday 11 March 8pm**

**Gordon Mitchell** has been Oxford City Council's Chief Executive since May 2017 and will be retiring from the post in April 2021. Gordon has provided strong support to the city council, including the creation of council-owned businesses, managing its finances in very difficult circumstances, addressing climate change, Covid recovery and the need to tackle inclusivity. He will describe how addressing these challenges will help us in the years ahead.

### More talks ...

We hope to offer further talks, arranged at short notice to discuss emerging issues. *Watch the e-bulletins and website for details.*

## Other dates for your diary 2021

**OxClean** – we hope to run our usual **Spring Clean** event from **Friday 12 March to Sunday 14 March**. Obviously we can't make firm plans that far ahead so please watch out for e-bulletins or visit the website nearer the time.

[www.oxclean.org.uk](http://www.oxclean.org.uk)

**AGM** – this will be held online, unless otherwise notified, on **Thursday 18 March at 6.30pm**.

Items for the agenda and nominations for the Executive Committee should reach Vernon Porter by 3 March (address on the back page).



# How well is the Society doing?

## What the survey of members revealed

A big thank you to all of you who took part in our survey in the summer. We now have a better insight into how well we are meeting your expectations.

This was the first time we had conducted a survey online (with a postal questionnaire for those without an email address) and to judge from the response, you found this a good way to proceed. About a quarter of the membership took part, higher than any previous survey. This level of response is considered high enough to give 'robust' findings.

The survey revealed a largely contented membership with much praise for the **programme** of walks, talks and visits. We were surprised to see that about a third of members are relaxed about the venue for talks and there was no call to change the timing of talks. Our various **communications** are also appreciated with some wanting more frequent e-bulletins and some suggesting we should look at social media we don't currently use. However some members admitted they were unaware of the extent of our online presence.

From answers to several questions it is clear that the Society is seen as **relevant** in the context of Oxford's myriad challenges. Few people could think of 'other things' we should be tackling though some thought we should be doing more on managing tourism more effectively.

However many members felt that they were at best only 'adequately' **informed** about the many issues we grapple

with. This has prompted much discussion about how we can raise our game.

We asked you to nominate the one thing that needs to **change in Oxford** and received a clear answer – more

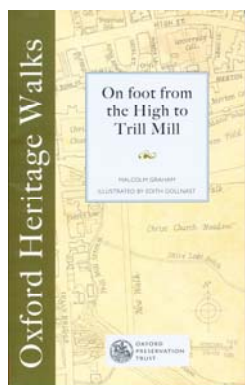
than half of you mentioned transport and traffic. You wanted to see fewer road vehicles, better public transport and more provision for cyclists and pedestrians. The Transport Group is already working to these ends.

We also invited you to say how the **Society itself** needs to change. Fewer than half of you made any suggestions but those responding mentioned our need to be more diverse and more consultative. Some of you thought we should be more critical of local policies when necessary.

The Executive Committee and working groups are now considering how to respond to your views. We have already held one webinar to **improve our consultation** with you (on the Society's response to the White Paper on planning) and expect to offer others, plus topical mini-surveys online. Watch the e-bulletins for details! You can read the report on the findings at: [www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/member-survey-2020](http://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/member-survey-2020)



## Enjoying Oxford on foot



**Oxford Preservation Trust** has just published the sixth and final walk in its city centre series compiled by Malcolm Graham and illustrated by Edith Gollnast. It covers the area south-east of Carfax, packed with history and listed buildings and it includes the wonderful green space, Christ Church Meadow. Full of interesting detail, the book runs to 120 pages, the longest in the series, and costs £12 from local bookshops.

## Have you changed your subs payment?

As notified, we are increasing our subscriptions from January 2021 (for the first time since 2006) to £15 for a single membership and £25 for two people living at the same address. We're also encouraging members to take out a Direct Debit. Please cancel your old standing order if you have one and help us to make this a smooth transition.

*Many thanks in anticipation from Liz Grosvenor!*

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

Membership costs £15 (£25 for two people at the same address) with concessions for students and residents' associations. Corporate rates on application. You can join online or contact Liz Grosvenor at [membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:membership@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

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[oxfordfutures.org.uk](http://oxfordfutures.org.uk) | [oxfordwalks.org.uk](http://oxfordwalks.org.uk)

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