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A time for crucial decisions



Great Western Park at Didcot is a massive development of over 3,000 homes. New housing is urgently needed in the county to keep pace with the demand. But where should it be built? How can we ensure development does not simply add more congestion to the roads? How do we provide the schools, health services and even the water and power that new developments require? We need to get smarter at planning.

Photo courtesy of Roddy Maddox

District, City and County councillors will soon be making critical decisions on the scale, pace, distribution and sustainability of growth in Oxfordshire. We've set out to help them by pulling together all the relevant strategies and plans in one document.

Whether there should be more growth in Oxfordshire and if so, how much and where, are highly contentious issues. If decision-makers get it right we stand to benefit from a thriving economy, more adequate housing, less road congestion, effective infrastructure, less pollution, thriving communities and wildlife. Get it wrong and we will pay a heavy price that we will regret for decades to come. All our futures are at stake.

As my previous articles have indicated, **there is no shortage of plans and strategies but to date no one document pulls them together to simplify decision making. So, we have done this as our contribution to the process.** The full document can be freely downloaded from our website*.

This summary and the booklet are aimed at all elected councillors in Oxfordshire and at businesses, special interest groups, community organisations, our members, residents and those who may not live in Oxfordshire, but who work or play here and who have concerns about the future of the county.

Several key plans and strategies, and associated studies, are relevant to the decisions being made:

The Oxfordshire Vision was agreed by the constituent local authorities of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership after public consultation and it sets out the intended impacts of the following key plans and strategies;

Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy – the Strategy sets out an ambitious vision for the region to be one of the top three global innovation ecosystems by 2040;

The Local Plans of the District and City Councils;

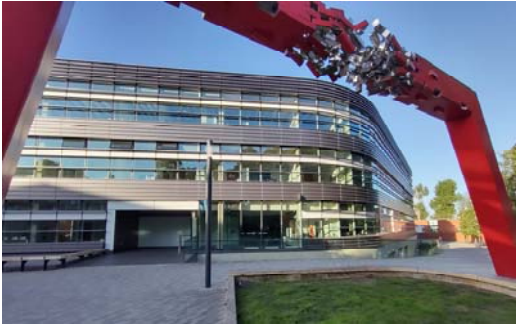
Pathways to a zero carbon Oxfordshire of the Environmental Change Institute and the Oxfordshire County Council Climate Action Framework;

Draft Oxfordshire 2050 Plan – this aims to set out the long-term, overarching and high-level spatial planning framework for Oxfordshire to 2050. The Plan is supported by the contentious Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA);

Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy – this aims to ensure adequate infrastructure and service provision, including to the new employment and housing locations;

Draft Local Transport and Connectivity Plan – this aims to ensure adequate sustainable county-wide transport provision, including to the new employment and housing locations.

Decisions, decisions ... (continued)



The University's Old Road campus is the size of a village. Such developments need thoughtful planning.

Photo courtesy of Roger Grosvenor

The scale of growth

Decisions on the scale, pace and distribution of growth, climate change and funding need to lead to the achievement of the Vision. Some of the actions and decisions needed during the consultation period include:

The assumptions and data underpinning the current **Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA)** need to be reviewed as a variety of serious technical challenges have been made. Following agreed revisions, the three growth options need to be reviewed, in particular for consistency with the climate change / environmental and social / inclusivity priorities of the Oxfordshire Vision.

The longer-term growth implications of the **Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy** need to be aligned with the growth implications of climate change, environmental management, inclusivity, infrastructure capacity, public and private funding availability and institutional capacity.

Funding for infrastructure and services to support growth does not appear to be a topic of much concern. But what is needed is a breakthrough in innovative funding arrangements to address the very significant funding shortfall identified in the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy.

The OGNA provides three post-pandemic scenarios which look ahead to 2050 and cover a range of contrasting behavioural changes resulting from the pandemic. **A decision is needed on which version of our future seems most likely** to occur.

Pace of growth

To a great extent the pace of growth is dictated by the fast pace of **growth of private sector investment**. But it will also need to be commensurate with the capacity (skills and funding) to undertake necessary public sector investments. **Capable management of growth will only happen with the right local government structures** and relevant skills.

Distribution of growth

Spatial distribution options cannot be evaluated without knowing the scale of growth to be accommodated and **this cannot be achieved until the OGNA is reviewed**. Spatial distribution should be determined by giving **equal weight to economic, climate change / environmental and social considerations**.

The ratio of employment and housing provision needs to be considered with **reduction of car travel and housing affordability the main aims**. Analysis of recent trends has shown that, as a result of employment growth outpacing the supply of housing, commuting into Oxfordshire has more than doubled over the past decade.

The distribution of growth should also take detailed account of basic infrastructure and the scope for extending existing infrastructure. Cost may be a significant factor in determining the distribution of growth and gaps may need to be closed before further development is implemented.

We must recognise that **the Knowledge Spine is a magnet for private sector investment**. Further growth in the Spine area must be assessed from a climate change / environmental and social / inclusivity point of view.

Public consultation

As there is no consensus on growth, **the proposed OGNA review needs to be in public**, with opportunities for discussion. It is a divisive topic and the plan will be better with public support behind it. To avoid confusion we suggest the next Oxfordshire 2050 Plan consultation includes inputs from the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy and other relevant strategies and plans in one succinct consultation document.

Governance fit for purpose

Consultation meetings need to include discussion of how the plans and strategies are relevant to national and local policy, including the Oxfordshire Vision, and how they complement each other. During implementation of the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan, **a Citizens Assembly** could report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Committee, supporting and strengthening the monitoring and evaluation process.

A continuous strategic planning process is needed. The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan will need to be rolled forward, with updates being synchronised with updates of other strategies. The continuous strategic planning process should use integrated economic, climate change / environmental / social / inclusivity teams. A team specialising in public sector funding innovation is needed – perhaps in association with other local authorities. This office could report to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, effectively being another of its sub-groups.

We look forward to being further involved in these issues, bringing the voice of our members into this critical decision-making process.

Ian Green
Chairman

* <https://bit.ly/ocs-devpol>

