



Planning Group

Purpose

The Society is dedicated to “the continuous improvement of Oxford as a wonderful city in which to live, work, study and relax”. The main role of the Planning Group is to influence and assess planning applications so that they have as far as possible a positive effect on people’s lives.

Membership

The members who come together every other Wednesday are: Gillian Argyle, Clive Booth, Gillian Coates, John Goddard, Richard Hayward, Eleanor Howard, Neil Maclennan, Stuart Scott, Peter Thompson and Tim Treacher. Other members are involved through a special email group list.

The Group’s work

Any Society member is welcome to ask to be added to the group email list which enables us to share news and information on matters as wide ranging as individual domestic applications, large university developments, or the City Council’s proposals for Local Plan policies up to the year 2036. Indeed, a consultation has recently been started on the draft Local Plan policy options and we would welcome new members who can join a team to develop an Oxford Civic Society response.

At present the ten members mentioned above meet fortnightly at the Oxford City Council’s Customer Service Centre at 109 St Aldate’s to scrutinise, discuss and comment on, selected planning applications. Our numbers are limited by the number of computer screens available to the public: we cannot be seen to be hogging all the terminals!

We are also often invited to discuss schemes in meetings before formal planning applications are submitted. These are invaluable opportunities to understand the aims of proposers and designers and to exercise influence on the evolution of the final proposals. We report to Society members through the termly *Visions* publication about some of the more interesting projects.

Although it may at first seem technically daunting, new members find that they soon get the hang of things and derive satisfaction and yes, enjoyment, from scrutinising applications. We are helped by guidelines issued by the City Council which list the main criteria against which planning applications must be assessed.

Looking back over the last year, there was no slackening in the flow of major new project proposals, many of them brought forward by the universities, colleges, NHS and research establishments. Some of these major projects are admirable. Others may be controversial. Of continuing concern is the proliferation of student housing projects that are not connected with either the universities or the colleges. We are glad that the City Council, together with the City of Cambridge, is undertaking a study of the student populations of the two cities to assist in the development of future planning policies.

- In 2016 the Planning Group scrutinised 1,250 planning applications out of a possible total of over 3,700. The great majority of these were unexceptionable; only 114, fewer than 10%, were deemed to require the Society's comment. They were spread across all areas of the city.
- Of the 114, 41 concerned domestic extension and garden projects. Extensions make sense at a time when moving to a larger house may be prohibitively expensive for many people. Very often the extensions proposed involve extending into the rear garden and using spare space to the side. Loft conversions are common. Two-storey extensions tend to be more likely to attract criticism because they can be over-bearing or overlook neighbours or threaten their light. Proposals for outbuildings in gardens are on the increase. In Conservation Areas, proposals for extensions can be particularly sensitive because any new development is required by city planning policies to preserve or enhance the character of the area.
- A further 23 applications commented on were for new dwellings, ranging from single houses to blocks of flats. We are on the watch for the tendency of proposers to want to "over-develop" a site, potentially causing serious discomfort for neighbours. Poor design is not uncommon, as is the omission of simple but important things like bike and bin stores.
- Another 18 applications commented on were for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). These are a symptom of Oxford's growing housing shortage. There are currently about 1,700 registered HMO's in the City. They are houses occupied by three or more unrelated tenants who share cooking or bathroom facilities. The Planning Group examines new HMO applications and is keen to ensure that they satisfy the City's strict criteria. HMO's are controversial among local residents because they are often occupied by young single people who may sometimes be noisy and disruptive. Yet renting a room may be the only way in which some single people - NHS staff, say, or other key workers - can afford to live in the city.

The Society's role in scrutinising planning applications is all the more important because a neighbourhood can easily miss the fact that a planning application has been submitted. The City Council's procedures for alerting neighbours are much more restricted than they were in the past - one of many economies forced on the Council by funding cuts. It is easy to miss a small yellow notice hanging from a lamp post! We enjoy a good relationship with the planning department and hope that our contribution helps them in their important work.

Opportunities for new members

We would welcome help with responding to the City Council's latest consultation on the Local Plan 2016 to 2036. Those who wish to be kept informed without being very active can be added to the Planning Group email list. We will be happy to note the interest of anyone wishing to get involved in the fortnightly Wednesday morning sessions so that they can join us if vacancies arise or the number of terminals is increased.

Contacts

For more information, please contact **Clive Booth** (OCS President and Planning Group Coordinator) on boothclive99@gmail.com