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## Whither long-term strategic planning?



Floods in January caused misery and chaos for residents, businesses and commuters. Flood prevention is just one critical issue that demands joined-up planning across the county.

Photo courtesy of Oxford City Council

Oxford's growth agenda continues to generate heated debate. In the latest Oxford Local Plan update, employment growth at the expense of housing growth and, especially, affordable housing in the large-scale West End and Oxford North developments garnered the most comments.

Not surprisingly, then, this topic engages the interest of our working groups – Planning, Transport, Oxfordshire Futures and Community Impact – and we enjoy lively e-mail exchanges ahead of meetings. One such recent exchange, led by one of our senior members, is worth repeating. The “massive growth agenda needs to be seen in the context of the disastrous national economy – enormous debt, rising interest rates, crises in the NHS, education, social care, housing and the cost of living together with a massive highways maintenance backlog and 60-year under-investment in rail infrastructure,” he noted. There is a clear need for a huge increase in government revenue.

Our colleague added: “massive and urgent improvements in productivity and growth of the national economy are required **now**. The gross disparity in regional economies (only two UK regions make a positive contribution to the national economy) needs massive correction, which is going to take decades at best, and many earlier attempts have been self-evidently ineffective. The South East, including Oxford, is a bright region where economic growth only needs relief from constraints (housing, transport infrastructure) **not** stimulation, an easy option for revenue growth.”

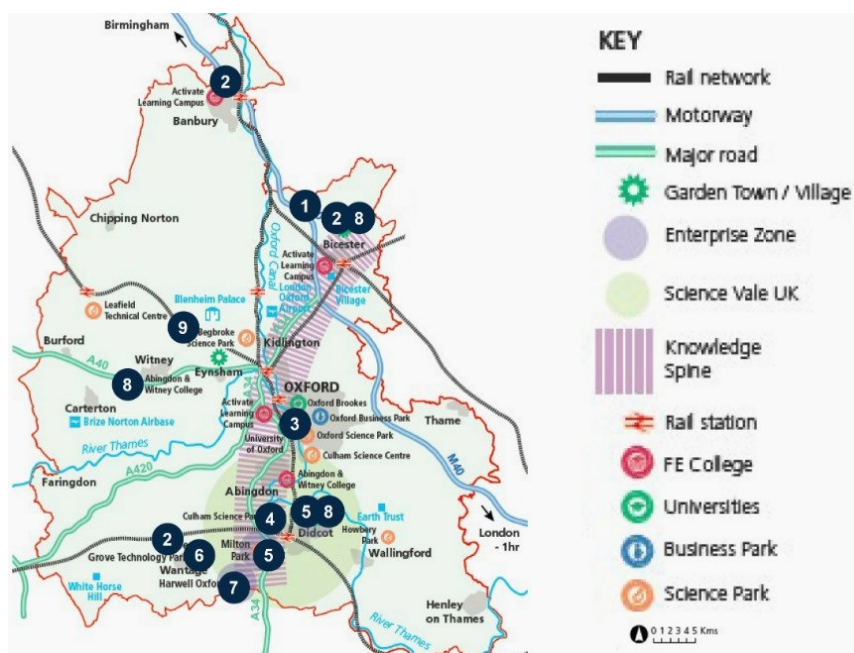
Moreover, “employment growth needs to be accommodated where employers need to be; allocating employment space where successful organisations don’t want to be is futile,” he pointed out. “The ‘knowledge economy’ requires location close to academic institutions and good transport. There is high demand for good-quality space thus located (Clarendon Centre, Oxpens, Botley Road) while building-out Oxford Business Park or Science Park has taken several decades because of weak demand.”

There is also the problem that if employees’ housing is not close to their jobs, they will add to the already heavily congested road network. The infrastructure is congested because: (a) there’s not much of it (no trams) and some is poor (bike tracks); and (b) cars are a more attractive proposition. The first issue reflects UK government policy of 60 years ago to build roads, while other cities like Freiburg and Grenoble, for example, established tram networks; and the second requires carrots (better, cheaper public transport) and sticks (parking levies, bus gates).

### The benefits of long-term county-wide planning

This exchange underscores one of our strongest ambitions: to ensure the whole region benefits from long-term (2050+) county-wide spatial planning to distribute employment and housing growth in ways that meet the needs of employers and employees and enable optimum provision of basic infrastructure (not just transport). This is one sure-fire way of

# Whither long-term strategic planning? (continued)



and a half years' preparation, including community involvement, because political agreement could not be reached on the long-term rate, pace and distribution of employment and housing growth.

Instead, we must try to identify a short-term county-wide spatial plan based on updated fragmented local plans from each of the five local planning authorities. As there is a lack of common ground on growth projections, this represents a sub-optimal basis for strategic planning. In the short-term (until 2040), Oxford's housing growth can be accommodated by neighbouring local planning authorities – but only because they have legacies of unbuilt house allocations from previous local plans. This is not a solid basis for tackling housing need and says nothing about the distribution of employment growth.

fixing many of the county's economic, environmental and social problems, albeit in a longer-term time frame than local election cycles or local plans.

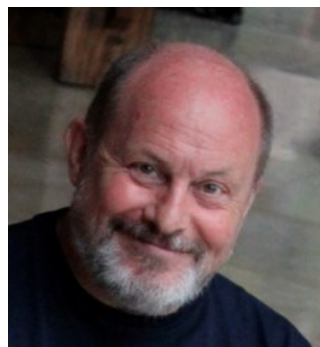
The most recent report from the Centre for Cities<sup>1</sup> notes that low productivity is one of the UK's core problems. We suffer from this in Oxfordshire too and do not give it enough attention. One of the causes is the current disintegrated arrangements for long-term spatial and infrastructure planning. They are a constraint on addressing climate change, improving air and water quality, biodiversity net gain, nature recovery and providing a clean, green transport network. They also constrain the achievement of strong and healthy communities, ensuring that new development considers and supports our physical and mental wellbeing, with high quality design, health infrastructure, leisure, sports and community facilities.

We do agree, however, that densifying some sites re-allocated in the updated local plans – near existing jobs, public transport and community networks – makes sense. These include sites next to city boundaries like Grenoble Road, Bayswater Brook and Northfield (already earmarked for 5,900 homes). The Oxford Local Plan also partially implements recommendations made in the largely ignored – and very much undervalued – winning submission to the Wolfson Economics Prize<sup>2</sup>.

We continue to work towards the recovery of the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and invigorate efforts on the associated Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy.

## Nearly but not quite

What is spiritsapping is that we came close to correcting this disintegration of regional planning. But the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan was abandoned by local authorities after two



Ian Green  
Chairman

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<sup>1</sup> Cities Outlook 2024, Centre for Cities, January 2024

<sup>2</sup> Uxcester Garden City: Wolfson Economics Prize, 2014 (Uxcester was based on Oxford City). The submission illustrated how Uxcester could double its size by adding three substantial urban extensions each housing around 50,000 people. Each would lie within a zone 10 km from the city centre. The concept is that for every hectare of development another will be given back to the city as accessible public space, forests, lakes, country parks etc. Each satellite extension would be served by trams or Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) running from the existing mainline station on disused lines and switching to on-street running to loop through the new neighbourhoods. Housing would be developed incrementally to create space for small developers and self-builders alongside volume housebuilders.



# Affordable housing vs office space

## Gillian Coates reports on the Planning Group

The question of **affordable housing**, whether purchased or rented, remains a major concern. We continue to challenge developers and the Council on its provision so were delighted by the opening of Bridges Cross, a four to six-storey block that provides 36 low-carbon homes, three-quarters of which are affordable. Each flat has a private garden or balcony as well as access to two communal courtyards. Bridges Cross is best known as the former site of homeless hostel Lucy Faithfull House.

We remain disappointed that the Council was not able to consider an alternative use for the Odeon building on George Street, although we are represented on the working group overseeing its future development. If the Council did not need to capture maximum revenue from its assets, we would have envisaged flats for workers, which would impact positively on both transport and local businesses.

The empty Debenhams building could also be transformed – although its future use is still undecided. Nextdoor Oxenford House is another contender but seems likely to be given over to commercial use and student accommodation. While the Council remains cash-starved, there is a single-minded drive to convert vacant buildings into labs and offices. We understand the need to maximise income from Council assets but question whether they can all be utilised – an issue to revisit.

The Group has also been involved in several preapplication discussions with developers, most recently Beaver House on Hythe Bridge Street and the Waynefflete Building at the Plain.

Our scrutiny of applications has impacted on some controversial proposals and we are delighted that, in several cases, the Council's action accords with our recommendations.

In future, however, we will need to run to keep up with the Government's anticipated changes. Whatever the outcome of the General Election, there will certainly be waves of proposals to scrutinise, comment upon and, inevitably, navigate. The list includes the replacement of the National Planning Policy Framework in favour of National Development Management Policies which, it is claimed, will result in more *locally relevant* plans, and new Permitted Development Rights – look out for the consultation in the spring.



*Bridges Cross provides some welcome affordable housing in the city centre.  
Photo courtesy of Oxplace*

# New Development Orders: coming soon

## Louise Thomas reports

The Government recently published the Street Votes Consultation Paper – a hyper-local development order introduced in the 2023 Levellingup and Regeneration Act. Professional opinions are divided: is this a red herring to get more people involved in planning and design or a simple way of approving local proposals by a street's residents?

The concept is that a group of 'qualifying residents' prepare a 'proposal' setting out what their 'street vote development order' will permit, within pre-determined parameters. The order must be consulted on locally and submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for examination, followed by a referendum. If successful, the order is implemented for an agreed period.

The Government has been consulting on who a 'qualifying resident' could be, how many would be required, what 'information' a proposal should contain, what the limitations

might be, and more. Clearly there is an expectation of neighbourliness to make it work. The paper sets out the definition of a 'street' and the proportion of homes needed to form a group.

Some view this as an opportunity to allow uncontroversial minor development to be approved easily. But, given the emphasis on design codes and neighbourhood planning, this seems an odd route to take, especially as the Planning Inspectorate is already so busy with larger housing issues and sites. At the close of the consultation in early February, commentators had already highlighted flaws in the proposed structure and processes. We can only hope that the idea is refined considerably in the coming months.

# Letters to the Editor

## Green principles in the age of fraud

Professor James Stevens Curl, our first Chair, responds to the November issue.

I am in despair when I consider how this nation is being run, especially when it comes to towns and cities. Vested interests, compartmentalised thinking and a punitive tax system are not likely to foster humane, agreeable environments.

Successive governments have paid lip-service to lowering carbon footprints, but in fact connive at increasing them. Carbon costs involved in new construction and in demolition far exceed those of re-using existing buildings. It is a national disgrace that embodied carbon is generally ignored in national planning and legislation: there should be an immediate *presumption against demolition of old buildings and a determination to reuse and adapt them for modern use.*



Re-purposing buildings could make a massive contribution to reducing the built environment's carbon footprint. But governments have not shifted from zero-rating VAT on new buildings yet charging 20% VAT on refurbishing existing structures. This works against a greener housing economy. Abolishing VAT on refurbishing existing buildings would demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development as well as help solve the housing problem. Adaptation of empty shops in town centres, for example, with unused accommodation above, could provide housing, bring life back to town centres, reuse embodied carbon and improve carbon-efficiency on a massive scale. The UK could have a constructive housing policy through the adaptation, conservation and reuse of existing buildings. Changes to levying VAT would encourage urban regeneration and lessen pressure to grab green spaces for development.

Current taxation policies favour the destruction of the Green Belt, catastrophic degradation of urban centres and destruction of existing buildings that could be reused – an equation that equals large carbon emissions. There remains a fundamental contradiction in the Government's declared policies towards carbon neutrality by 2050: despite policies pretending to be 'green', VAT achieves the opposite and, with architectural 'education' nothing of the sort, we are in a right old mess.

## Oxford's transport problems need 'carrots'

Juliet Blackburn, Transport Group, writes.

Louise Thomas noted in the last newsletter that transport policy should include more 'carrots' than 'sticks'. Oxford's traffic management plans, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), a workplace levy, traffic filters and a city centre Zero Emissions Zone, are all 'sticks'. There is nothing to replace vehicles for small businesses or for people who cannot walk or cycle. These measures are unlikely to reorganise Oxford's dysfunctional transport system and may prove politically unpopular.

What could be done to improve our transport system? Over the years, the Transport Group has made many useful suggestions, such as moving the railway station to Oxpens and creating a transport hub. Had this been done when OCS first suggested it in 2011, we might not now be suffering from the extended closure of Botley Road.

Looking forward, we have suggested a parallel route along the Botley Road – but for transport other than cars. This could either be a tramway or an aerial lift from Seacourt Park and Ride to Oxpens with its own bridge. A radial tramway route around South Oxford could link Blackbird Leys, Magdalen Science Park and the proposed Cowley rail station to the hospitals (or Thornhill Park and Ride). ACT4Oxford Group ([www.act4oxford.org](http://www.act4oxford.org)) has also proposed an aerial cable system running parallel to Abingdon Road to tackle the traffic in central Oxford that is horribly affected by vehicles using the Westgate carpark.

Current proposed and existing 'sticks' have slowed bus services further, despite successive plans aiming to "get people out of their cars" and onto buses. Why take a bus when it is slower than it used to be?





# Ahead of the game?

## Andrew Pritchard reports on the Transport group

New means for ameliorating Oxford's transport problems are always of interest to us, so we recently met with the project director of Coventry City Council's proposals to introduce a Very Light Rail (VLR) system. VLR uses a new track form that does not require the expensive relocation of services, significantly reducing costs and making projects more viable for cities suffering from traffic congestion. We were interested to hear about the technical aspects of VLR and the reasons for its adoption, since Coventry suffers from many of the same transport problems as Oxford. We are now looking at whether the approach could provide Oxford with the Rapid Transit System envisaged in the County's Local Transport Plan LTP4, which has been dropped in the current LTCP plan.

### Tourist traffic

The Transport Group met with Experience Oxfordshire (EO) to raise our concerns about the transport of tourists in Oxford, especially the number of coaches. EO is funded entirely by its partners, who are concerned mainly with maximising tourist revenue. Oxford City Council is **not** one of those partners, we were alarmed to discover, although there is some informal contact. We urged EO to provide more information in tourist maps about accessing destinations in Oxford by public transport.

### Transport hub for Oxford

Our support for a single transport hub at the new rail station, designs for which are currently being developed, has been warmly welcomed by Stagecoach's Rachel Geliamassi (now Customer Services Manager at GWR) and Oxford Bus Company's Luke Marion. The plans include provision for more bus routes in the future. Although the 2040 Local Plan

gives no details, we are trying to find out more. The bus companies are looking to a 6% improvement in performance from the introduction of traffic filters and do not expect any reopening of the Cowley branch line to passenger services to affect bus use.



*The proposed Oxpens Bridge – too narrow?*

*Photo courtesy of Oxford City Council*

### Rail links

The Oxfordshire Community Rail Partnership was recently launched, based on a similar partnership in Gloucestershire, aiming to look at the social value of rail, access and inclusion, leisure and tourism, and stations as 'places'. It is supported by Oxford University, the bus companies and the Junior Citizens Trust. We have suggested that better on-platform shelters at Oxford Parkway Station would be a suitable project.

The full consultants' report on the proposed rail link between Carterton, Witney, Eynsham and Oxford has been published and we are looking at the details. The report suggests that by 2031, buses to Oxford along the A40 will be needed every three minutes, implying a much bigger demand than can be satisfied by the suggested two-coach train every 30 minutes. This raises questions about the value for money of the heavy rail link, assuming that space at Oxford station can be found for the trains.

### Cycling: in Broad Street and over the river

And finally... arrangements for cycles in Broad Street are to be made permanent, following a successful trial during the Christmas market.

The City, County and two universities are funding the next stage of the Greenways project but we feel that the design of the new cycle and pedestrian bridge from Oxpens Road across the Thames has inadequate space for both.



*North Shields transport hub, opened in 2023, brings together buses, the Metro, taxis and cycling facilities on one site. We need this approach here.*

*Photo courtesy of North Tyneside Council*

# OCS Calendar

'Cut out and keep'

March–July 2024

\*ticketed events

All talks this term are at  
Rewley House,  
1 Wellington Square, OX1 2JA

Wednesday 27 March 6pm talk  
7pm AGM

**Pevsner's Guide to the buildings of  
Oxford and South-East  
Oxfordshire**, a talk by Dr Simon  
Bradley followed by the AGM

Wednesday 8 May 6pm

**Tackling food poverty and food  
waste**, a talk by Sâmân Jam-  
shidifard, Fiona Steel and Emily  
Smith

Tuesday 14 May\* 2pm

**Broughton Grange Gardens**, a  
guided tour led by the head  
gardener

Wednesday 5 June 8pm

**Living the lexicon ... the Oxford  
English Dictionary**, a talk by  
Simon Wenham

Friday 14 June\* 2.30pm

**Green Templeton College and the  
Tower of the Winds/Radcliffe  
Observatory**, a guided tour

Wednesday 26 June 8pm

**Henry VII and the Oxfordshire Plot**,  
a talk by Nathen Amin

Saturday 20 July\* 10.30am

**A guided walk around Abingdon**,  
led by the Friends of Abingdon Civic  
Society

Date to be announced  
Reuben College\*

*Do bring a friend to our talks. If  
they wish they can join the Society  
at our welcome desk.*

## Booking details

### How to book tickets

We are now using Eventbrite to take online bookings for all our guided tours and visits.

Please go to our website [www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/programme/](http://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk/programme/) and click on 'visits & guided tours' to book your place on these visits and pay for them. If you find we have reached our maximum capacity for a particular event, please make use of the waitlist function in Eventbrite.

Bookings are taken on a first-come, first-served basis but the lists will stay open until seven days before the event. If you are offered a ticket via the waitlist you have 72 hours to claim it. A joint member may book two tickets.

You can cancel your booking up to 30 days before the event and get a partial refund – Eventbrite takes a small percentage of the fee. After that no refunds can be offered.

*If you book and cannot attend the event, we urge you to cancel as soon as you can so that someone else can take your place. Our events are popular and we almost always have a waiting list.*

Our booking process previously included an option for members to book our guided tours and visits via post. However, we have reluctantly decided that we will have to restrict bookings to online-only as of the start of the 2024 programme, bringing us into line with most other events organisers. This change is partly due to the added administrative work that postal booking involves. In addition, many of our events now book out within days of becoming available, so those trying to book via post are often disappointed. We apologise for any inconvenience this change in policy causes.

**Please note:** our guided tours and visits are open to MEMBERS ONLY. If you book a ticket and are NOT a fully-paid-up member you will need to join.



Event	Price
<b>Broughton Grange Gardens</b> Tuesday 14 May, 2pm (note: the fee is set by the Gardens)	£29
<b>Green Templeton College and the Tower of the Winds/Radcliffe Observatory</b> Friday 14 June, 2.30pm	£8
<b>A guided walk around Abingdon</b> Saturday 20 July, 10.30am	£8





# Programme May - July 2024

## Talks – all welcome

Talks are free and don't need to be booked ahead, just turn up.  
*All talks this term are at Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, OX1 2JA*

### Tackling food poverty and food waste

**Wednesday 8 May, 6pm**

Sâmân Jamshidifard started off as a volunteer in local community groups and has gone on to establish his own initiatives such as Botley Community Kitchen, West Oxford Community Larder and Feelgood Bikes. Sâmân will describe his Community Ambassador scheme and his success in inspiring local communities to fight food poverty while at the same time reducing waste. Fiona Steel (Good Food Oxfordshire) and Emily Smith (Oxford Food Hub) will complement this with an overview of other initiatives in the city and county.



### Living the lexicon: James Murray and the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary

**Wednesday 5 June, 8pm**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is one of the most famous books of all time, but compiling it was a Herculean task led

by the tireless lexicographer James Murray. This talk by **Simon Wenham** describes the trials and tribulations behind one of the greatest works of literature in the English language.



### Henry VII and the Oxfordshire Plot

**Wednesday 26 June, 8pm**

When, in 1485, Henry Tudor emerged victorious from the Battle of Bosworth, he brought 'smooth-faced peace ... and fair prosperous days' back to England. Yet all was not well early in the Tudor reign. Despite later attempts to portray Henry VII as singlehandedly uniting a war-torn England after three decades of conflict, the kingdom was anything but settled. Soon, in Oxford, a plot was underway to kill the Tudor king. This talk by historian **Nathen Amin** reveals just how close the Tudors came to being overthrown, long before the myth of their greatness had taken hold on our public consciousness.



## Members-only visits and guided tours

Tickets are needed for these events: tickets on a first-come, first-served basis. See page 6 for details.

### Broughton Grange Gardens

**Tuesday 14 May, 2pm**

The gardens at Broughton Grange have been created over the past 25 years and are now recognised as one of the most significant private contemporary gardens in Britain. The ticket price includes entrance to the gardens, a guided tour with the head gardener or assistant head gardener plus light refreshments (tea/coffee and cake). The visit will take in most areas of the gardens and last up to two hours. We regret this tour is not suitable for people with mobility difficulties.



### Green Templeton College and the Tower of the Winds/Radcliffe Observatory

**Friday 14 June, 2.30pm**

This visit will include a guided tour of Green Templeton College's beautifully maintained gardens before going on to the Radcliffe Observatory Building. The Observatory includes

the historical Dining Hall, Common Room and the stunning Tower of the Winds.

### A guided walk around Abingdon

**Saturday 20 July, 10.30am**

This year marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Friends of Abingdon Civic Society. In honour of this occasion, the Friends are hosting a two-hour walk around the heart of the town, taking in the river setting and much of the fine architecture, including the medieval abbey, churches, almshouses and industrial heritage.



### Reuben College

**Date to be announced**

*Coming soon: a visit to Oxford University's newest college. Look out for the e-bulletin announcing the date.*

# New Blue Plaques

Eda Forbes of the Blue Plaques Board reports on six new plaques unveiled across the county in 2023, honouring seven special people.

The season began with the celebration of **Sir Ludwig Guttmann** (1899–1980), neurosurgeon and refugee from Nazi Germany, who lived at 63 Lonsdale Road, Summertown from 1939 to 1951. Invited to head the new spinal injuries centre at Stoke Mandeville, he conceived the therapy of wheelchair sports and promoted the idea of the Paralympic Games. Our photo shows his daughter Eva Loeffler OBE (centre) who gave a marvellous speech.



We added to the tally of women recipients with **Dame Iris Murdoch** (1919–1999), novelist and moral philosopher, at 30 Charlbury Road, where she lived from 1989 to 1999, and **Philippa Foot** (1920–2010), transformative moral philosopher, at 15 Walton Street, her home from 1972 to 2010. **Sir Leslie Kirkley** (1911–1989), humanitarian and first Director of Oxfam, was a towering figure in the development of the global aid agency we know today. He was commemorated at 25 Capel Close, Summertown, where he lived from 1976 to 1989.

In the county at Aston Upthorpe, we celebrated **Sir Patrick Abercrombie** (1879–1957), pioneer of town and country planning, founder member of CPRE, at the Red House, his home from c.1945 to 1957. His great innovations were the green belt, new towns and protection of the countryside. Residents of East Hendred were delighted to have a joint plaque for **Roy Jenkins**, OM (1920–2003), eminent politician, biographer and Chancellor of the University of Oxford, and **Dame Jennifer Jenkins** (1921–2017), conservationist and public servant, at St Amand's House where they lived from 1965.

The Blue Plaques Board remain very grateful for the Society's ongoing support.

Read more at [www.oxonblueplaques.org.uk](http://www.oxonblueplaques.org.uk)

With thanks to Stephanie Jenkins for the photograph.

# AGM – do join us

Our 55<sup>th</sup> AGM will be held at Rewley House in Wellington Square at 7pm following a talk by Simon Bradley on Pevsner's guide at 6pm. Please join us!

Please bring this agenda with you and the Annual Review of 2023, mailed with the newsletter – this is our report to members.

Copies of the minutes of the AGM, the Special Meeting on 14 June and the full accounts for 2023 are available on our website and from me: [info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

## Agenda

1. President's welcome
2. Apologies for absence
3. Minutes of AGM held Tuesday 21 March 2023
4. Minutes of the Special Meeting 14 June 2023
5. Matters arising from the minutes
6. Annual report 2023
7. Accounts for 2023
8. Vote of thanks to retiring Officer and Trustees
9. Election of Officers for 2024–25
10. Election of Committee members for 2024–25
11. Any other business of which notice has been given

**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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