

## SANDFORD ON THAMES PARISH COUNCIL

### Sandford on Thames Parish Council Comments on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050

1. Overall, Sandford on Thames Parish Council are sceptical about the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (the Plan) as:

It is not honest about the fundamental change in the character of Oxfordshire that it proposes. The amount of development proposed cannot avoid changing Oxfordshire from a rural county with discrete areas of high economic activity into an intensive economic area with discrete areas of preserved rurality. History shows that these preserved areas are repeatedly threatened. It falls into the trap of trying to plan most when we know least. It does not acknowledge the uncertainties and the need to review both the Plan's aims and progress towards them, and the need to adjust these if required as emergent factors alter the context in which it operates.

2. One challenge in commenting on the Plan is that the uncertainties resulting from the long timescale involved and the consequences of other plans (the 2034 Plan, the route of the Expressway etc) mean that the Plan itself has to be vague, uncertain and aspirational. Nevertheless, detailed comments are below.

3. The Plan is disingenuous about the impact that the planned development will have on the county. The proposed east-west rail link, Expressway, water infrastructure projects and massive increase in housing will profoundly alter the character of Oxfordshire. This might be desirable from a national perspective, but from the point of view of most current county residents it appears not to be so. Thus, when the Oxfordshire Growth Board ask the question "what do you want Oxfordshire to look like in 2050?"<sup>1</sup>, the answer "Pretty much how it looks today." is not countenanced. Current publicity material illustrates rather than acknowledges the inherent contradictions, eg:

*"We want to keep Oxfordshire a world leader in technology and innovation, ensure there are plenty of good well-paid jobs, preserve the history and heritage that draws millions of tourists each year, and give our children and grandchildren the opportunity to own homes in the county we love, while maintaining the amazing environment we live in."*<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while Oxfordshire "... consistently ranks high for quality of life and remains the most rural county in the South-East."<sup>2</sup>, as a result of this plan it may well not do either of these in the future.

4. The Plan contains many aspirations, some of which are worthy, some of which are questionable. Some worthy ones are insubstantial, for example:

*Paragraph 42. There is a clear benefit to ensure that all residents of Oxfordshire have a good quality of life ... The Plan could provide an opportunity to ensure a long-term and co-ordinated approach to healthy place-making across Oxfordshire ...*

Yes, it could but there is no clear statement that it will. In addition, it would be quite possible to achieve these aspirations for the current and natural-growth population of Oxfordshire without the massive increase in population, which will in itself make these aspirations less achievable.

There are questionable aspirations, for example:

*"The Oxford Green Belt is designed to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. The Oxfordshire Plan offers an opportunity to assess the overall Oxford Green Belt strategy."* (paragraph 16)

Evidence from the SODC Plan 2034 shows that this assessment of Green Belt strategy means to ignore its "essential characteristics" and build on it.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxfordshire Growth Board Press Release, 8 Jan 2019

<sup>2</sup> <https://oxfordshireplan.org/>

5. The Plan contains contradictory aspirations. For example, it acknowledges the county's high employment rate, spread across a wide variety of sectors (paragraph 11). It also states that the county is strong in "... a range of sciences and research and development sectors" (paragraph 45) and the intention is to build on this through the Local Industrial Strategy. Yet it also states:

*"...could mean that economic policies are framed to try and ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared widely throughout the community rather than focused on particular sectors. It could mean including policies that seek to address inequality of access to local services or public transport. More broadly it could mean making sure that choices taken in the plan are based on considerations of health and wellbeing for example."* (paragraph 43)

Which is more important?

6. The Plan does not acknowledge past mistakes (and thus the opportunities to learn from them). For example, it states that:

*"The vitality of town centres have been negatively affected by the development in the 1990s-2000s of out-of-town shopping centres ... new town centre shopping developments come forward in the last 10 years and the Oxfordshire Plan should build on this to continue to bring activity and spend back to town centres to support local businesses and foster vibrant communities."* (paragraph 48)

This appears not to recognise the devastating impact that the Westgate shopping centre in Oxford has had on the shops in the High Street, Covered Market and Cornmarket and just how this Plan will "foster vibrant communities".

7. The Plan does not acknowledge that the uncertainties inherent in its timescale and the complex nature of planning outcomes mean that some of its intentions are likely to be self-defeating. While the effect of Westgate on the other retail areas of central Oxford could have been foreseen, other negative effects might emerge. For example, it states the intention to improve broadband access and tackle wealth inequality. Yet there is evidence that improved connectivity increases wealth disparity<sup>3</sup>. There are references to other plans that will need to be reviewed in the light of this Plan. There is no recognition of the need to review both the intended outcomes of the Plan and whether the actions recommended are achieving them.

8. The Plan contains circular arguments. Paragraph 46 states that "*Maximising the creation of wealth in the county will help address infrastructure challenges and tackle inequalities*". Many of the infrastructure challenges and inequalities will be created by the Plan. Draft Objective 7 is "*To meet the county's identified housing needs, particularly affordable housing and support our selected economic aspirations*". This presupposes that there is an identified housing need. Objections to the SODC 2034 Plan have already highlighted the weaknesses in the current calculations of housing need; the needs for 2050 are largely self-generating from the self-selected economic aspirations.

9. Affordable housing is a supply-side problem to which the Plan does not have a coherent approach. While the Plan identifies ways to address this problem through greatly increased house-building, it also includes huge demand-side effects on housing prices. Draft Objective 8 seeks "*To ensure that [houses] are built for adaptability, energy efficiency and to a high quality*". Adaptability, efficiency and quality all put build-price up. Building regulations have been loosened so that new-build estates are notoriously shoddy but there is no indication as to how, specifically, all these new houses are going to be meet the identified criteria. However, we do need to have zero carbon new buildings, including houses.

10. The Plan is incoherent in places. Draft Objective 10 states "*To promote development in the most sustainable locations and co-locating homes and jobs; then connecting those less sustainable locations through improved public transport and digital networks*" It is not clear what this actually means.

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<sup>3</sup> Akerman, Gaarder and Mogstad, *The Skill Complementarity of Broadband Internet*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 2015

