



Oxfordshire Open Thought – Need not Greed Oxfordshire response, July 2020

Need not Greed Oxfordshire (NNGO) welcomes this opportunity to input to the debate about Oxfordshire's future.

However, this engagement exercise in no way fulfils the need for a full and open public debate about the levels of growth being pursued for the county and the subsequent implications.

The reality is that many key decisions have been or are being taken behind closed doors.

We note for example:

- The Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy 2019, prepared by the unelected Local Enterprise Partnership and signed off by Government without public consultation
- [The Oxford-Cambridge Arc: government ambition and joint declaration between government and local partners](#) 2019
- The intention of the Ox Cam Arc Executive Leaders Group to prepare a prospectus for the Arc to pitch for Government recovery funding in this autumn's Comprehensive Spending Review.

Any 2050 growth strategy brought forward in this context risks being fundamentally undemocratic and likely to make a significant net contribution to our impending climate catastrophe.

NNGO calls for

- A restoration of planning principles, with a proper balancing of economic, environmental and social considerations;
- Local democracy, with planning control in the hands of locally elected and accountable representatives; and
- Environment and rural sustainability, ensuring that our landscape, nature and rural communities are at the heart of decision-making.

LIVING AND WORKING

1. Achieving sustainable communities

Growth and employment

Why not make any more land allocations conditional on there being a clear need for them, subject to review as 2030 and then 2040 draw near?

The future is uncertain and we cannot accurately predict the number of jobs or housing need in Oxfordshire in 2050. In the last few years, we have had an international banking crisis, Brexit and the Coronavirus pandemic. Nobody could have firmly predicted these events.

There was an increase in jobs in the County up to the crisis, but these included low paid, part time and zero hours roles and uncertain self-employment. Coronavirus has had a dramatic and likely long-term impact on the economy.

So, continuing to forecast rapid growth in the Oxfordshire economy, and a consequent vast demand for new expensive housing, is misplaced. In practice, the land allocations in the existing local plans may prove more than sufficient to allow for growth for years after 2030.

Land Value Capture

Why don't we change a development system that gives large unearned profits to land owners merely as a result of designating land for development?

Capturing some of this uplift for the benefit of the community could support more affordable housing or additional infrastructure and services.

Levelling Up

Truly vast amounts of government borrowing are needed to fund the Coronavirus lockdown (borrowing is likely to be £227Bn this year, more than six times the figure predicted in the March 2020 budget – and the worst-case figure is £516Bn¹). The government was elected in 2019 on a manifesto that said:

'This means that debt will be lower at the end of the Parliament – rather than spiralling out of control under Labour. And we will use this investment prudently and strategically to level up every part of the United Kingdom, while strengthening the ties that bind it together.'

Levelling up will mean more investment in the North of England and other relatively deprived areas that have suffered due to the Coronavirus. The government may be wary of further increasing the massive public sector debt. So, the areas that need to be levelled up should be the priority for any available government investment.

¹ From Public Finance magazine, June 2020, page 4

'Brain drain' emigration from areas that need to be 'levelled up' is not a long-term sustainable strategy for the country as a whole.

Why don't we plan positively for current and future Oxfordshire residents, but not in such a way that it is based on artificially incentivising people to move to the county from other parts of the UK?

We should try Doughnut economics

During the Coronavirus it has been very encouraging to see the emergence of more local voluntary citizen-based groups to arrange and provide support for everyone, such as the Abingdon Community Response Team. The problems of homelessness were in many cases solved overnight by buying space in otherwise empty hotels. These are models for how things might work in the future. But they may well need some state or local authority intervention and support. We also need to acknowledge that our poorer people and communities and minority groups have been harder hit than others and consider appropriate long-term response mechanisms.

NNGO considers that we should focus on protecting and enhancing the existing environment of Oxfordshire. We should refocus as much of the economy as we can, and focus on a much wider picture, moving away from the 'GDP' focused targets to a wider appreciation and respect for the environmental limits on growth. This means applying the principles of 'Doughnut Economics' (Kate Raworth²). This approach can be applied to individual businesses and cities as well as to nations.

Keep some of the recent adaptations

The Coronavirus has meant that many people have had to change their ways making them more sustainable. For example, working at home, avoiding foreign and air travel, varying working hours and using bikes and walking to get around. The benefit of clean air, less consequent illness and a wider emergence of nature has been a side-effect of this. We are part of the natural world, not the masters of it.

We should encourage and support the positive changes that have occurred during Coronavirus. For example, by improving cycle access and encouraging employers to keep 'working at home' arrangements in place where this is mutually beneficial.

Oxfordshire's aging population

It is clear that the population is aging and NNGO does not think we should plan for a significant increase in the working population in Oxfordshire. A significant increase could only come from in-migration, which implies that other parts of the country would lose skilled workers, further widening the gaps between different parts of the UK.

The elderly population has been hard hit by the virus and the related unfortunate and unnecessary additional deaths in care homes. Social care provision and funding

² And the forthcoming <http://www.doughnuteconomics.org/>

needs to be sorted out to cope with increasing numbers. More residential homes for the elderly and property adapted for people with reduced mobility, or who want to down-size, will be needed. More appropriate housing for elderly people will be needed, allowing downsizing to free up larger properties.

2. Achieving sustainable living

Low Carbon living

NNGO thinks we could have been building better insulated housing that lowers carbon emission for 20 or 30 years, but for some reason have not done so. Why? Who would not want to live in a house that was warm and cosy and has very low energy bills?

An urgent change to building only low carbon housing is essential if we are to decarbonise. There is no point building any new houses that will have to be upgraded before 2050 to meet the zero-carbon target.

Any new building should also be built with comprehensive insulation. They must use new sources of energy. Ideally air or ground source heat pumps and solar panels. Heat pumps need larger internal radiators in the house as they produce water at lower temperatures than a gas boiler. Solar cells on the roof would be an obvious way of reducing bills. Also charging points for electric vehicles should be provided.

Water efficient living

Grey water recycling, rainwater harvesting and other water efficiency measures should be mandatory for all new-builds as soon as possible, say from 2024 onwards. New developments should only be allowed when these incorporate recycling of household water and where a significant part of household water needs can be met with recycled water.

All major development should be required to identify and resource sustainable water supplies and waste water management facilities before being granted permission.

Local authorities should be required to regard water supply and treatment issues, and the need to protect the water environment, as a constraint similar to designated landscapes, the Green Belt and geo/biodiversity sites. They must have the power to refuse planning consent if local water resource or management is inadequate.

However, continuing to push significant development to parts of the country that are under water-stress is not a long-term viable economic or environmental option. This should be a factor taken into consideration as part of the Government's 'levelling up' agenda.

Climate resilient living

NNGO considers that we can increase resilience by having more well insulated houses that can generate much of the power they need. This could be achieved by refitting existing property and not building more new houses that rely on gas central heating.

Resilience is also improved by having well paid permanent employment. Strong, well-funded local organisations – Councils and notably the NHS are also vital.

3. Strengthening Oxfordshire's natural assets

Access to green space

Space to wander, exercise and be refreshed have proved crucial for residents in Coronavirus. NNGO suggests they should be essential in any new development. Existing key sites in urban areas should be protected and conserved, such as Gavray meadows in Bicester.

Making green and blue spaces work better

The Thames winds its way through Oxford, easy to miss and almost forgotten, from Osney Lock to Folly Bridge. Waterfront sites are attractive and key, but sometimes existing development conceals them. So improved design and allowing public access to the waterfront would help when there is an opportunity to change.

Supporting biodiversity

Modern intensive agriculture is detrimental to biodiversity. The effects can be alleviated by carefully directed subsidy – instead of the area-based approach used by EU subsidies. Features such as hedgerows, ponds, patches of woodland, meadows and marshes and routes for wildlife from one area to another, need to be treasured, retained and increased.

Biodiversity can be increased – just replacing an intensively farmed field with houses with back gardens can do that. But key biodiverse elements - for example ancient woodlands and meadows - once lost, cannot be rebuilt. So, increasing biodiversity in urban areas or in new developments is very important but it is no substitute or compensation for destruction of existing long-standing and complex biodiverse environments.

Connectivity for wildlife should be given at least as much priority as connectivity for humans (more roads etc).

4. New ways of working in 2050

The debate about technology and the future grows louder by the day

Technical change drives itself, and as a result the consequences are sometimes unpredicted and poor. On-line ordering of goods is an excellent example – leading to loss of high street shops, more white vans on the road and poor-quality jobs in massive warehouses and delivering goods. The result is customer satisfaction with easily accessible goods and low prices, but more staying at home and related social isolation. In the longer term, even the jobs in the warehouses are being largely automated out of existence.

Overall, it has meant that one person can get to be the richest person on the whole planet, but far too many others have poor quality jobs and low pay.

Automation and skills

Automation and Artificial intelligence are elements of technological change. They can increase productivity but jobs are lost. Unless the remaining jobs are highly skilled or valued because of the human contact they provide, the general experience of employment may be lower in quality.

Artificial intelligence developed by training based on real-world examples can work well, but the reasoning behind individual decisions may then be completely obscure. Existing prejudices can be unwittingly built into a decision-making system.

Tele-commuting and co-working

Home working is likely to increase, but for many jobs it is not ideal and it may be impossible where 'presence' or human contact is required. So, it is likely to remain at a higher level after Coronavirus, which is welcome. It can lead to feelings of isolation though.

Other features, such as staggering working hours (or flexitime systems) are also helpful at reducing congestion. Urban traffic systems can be overwhelmed if one large employer requires all its staff to start and finish at the same time. Fixed office hours are sometimes needed where teams of people need to be present to do the work, or where a service needs to be continuously available.

Work-life balance

Providing good leisure facilities is important. Adopting 'Doughnut' principles that take a wider view of what is good for humanity in the longer run will also help.

CONNECTIVITY

Personalised freight

Digital delivery and services

Having everything delivered to your door is convenient and important for some people. However, there are downsides, involving 'white vans' being used inefficiently to deliver small parcels to houses, particularly when a 'same or next day delivery' promise has been made. Several different delivery firms are often used.

Perhaps there should be a 'delivery tax' to discourage inefficient delivery?

Why don't we have one national delivery service instead – oh! That's the Post Office!

Drones

Whilst drones may be possible for deliveries, there are many problems including issues of security, safety, noise and tranquillity.

Oxon 2050 should include a policy on drone deliveries to avoid, reduce and mitigate any negative impacts.

CLIMATE CHANGE

1. Carbon

Our large footprint

Oxfordshire should become 'carbon negative' by 2050 or preferably earlier.

An increase in solar power could make an important contribution to this, but that must not be at the expense of precious open/agricultural land. For example, making solar power should be a requirement on all new build property, requiring roofs to be South facing and clear of chimneys to maximise the benefits.

Other carbon capture and storage technologies could be useful. Though NNGO is not convinced that using old oil wells to store CO₂ would be sustainable in the long term as leakage might occur. Battery systems are likely to be needed to deal with demand in poor weather. Ultimately, we may need fusion power, nuclear or fossil fuels with carbon capture (although not if the views of CAT are heeded:

<https://www.cat.org.uk/info-resources/zero-carbon-britain/>)

Farming animals is one area where methane emissions might be reduced by reducing cattle numbers and products and even feeding cows seaweed³ for example.

Hidden emissions

Much of our emissions are hidden because we import so much from abroad. Maybe all goods for sale should declare their carbon emission effects? Or as you mention Evian water, demonstrate that they have a zero effect?

Lack of action

We could have spent the last 20-30 years reducing emissions, but have failed to do this. Now the consequences are becoming clearer, with climate high temperature records being broken on a monthly basis, and with severe and bizarre⁴ weather becoming a feature.

We have one last chance to avoid being labelled the generation that trashed the planet. It is imperative that we make rapid progress on reversing climate change.

³ Asparagopsis taxiformis

⁴ For example the long hot dry spell during Coronavirus which was then replaced with a long dry spell, fires in Australia, Polar ice melting etc etc etc...

2. Air

Air polluting habits

Calculations suggest that around 50 people a year are dying early due to air pollution in the Vale of White Horse District alone.

The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan must take a proactive, game-changing approach to reducing the need to travel and to supporting active travel (in line with recent Government announcements).

Slow air restoration

Nature, technology and even paint can improve the environment and NNGO supports these and any similar activities.

Invisible problem

Warnings of high pollution levels would help people avoid it and also bring it to their attention. High levels might be linked to the advice given by Satnavs?

3. Water

Wasteful water usage

Water, like many environmental features has been abused and used as a dumping ground for waste. Poor treatment of waste causes further problems. Flooding, which Oxfordshire is prone to, can overwhelm sewage disposal systems.

NNGO considers that having very rapid rates of local growth in Oxfordshire will make matters worse and ultimately lead to some sort of crisis. Large estates have large problems as illustrated by Great Western Park near Didcot, which relied on tankered-out waste disposal for some time. Sorting out sewage disposal for the North Abingdon estate – which has yet to start building - is an emerging issue.

Getting a profit focused water authority to sort out leaks and losses, notably one that loses 227 Olympic swimming pools of water a day (Thames Water) can be a problem. A private sector approach might be to ignore increasing demand, but increase prices, leading to affordability and eventually health and environmental problems.

All major development must be required to identify and resource sustainable water supplies and waste water management facilities before being granted permission.

4. Biodiversity

Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery Network

The emerging Nature Recovery Network for Oxfordshire is of vital importance and should be recognised in both the spatial element of Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and the specific policies.

NNGO supports the concept of net environmental gain in principle. However, our experience with developers is that they are strong on arguing *down* the ecological value of development land and arguing *up* the benefits of any mitigation. Local authorities must have robust policies and adequate resources in place to enable adequate challenge to proposals and subsequent enforcement.

Soil & agricultural land

Oxfordshire 2050 should include policies that make clear the importance of avoiding, for food security reasons, any further development on best and most versatile agricultural land – Grade 1, 2 and 3a & b.

Soil health is increasingly being recognised as one of our most precious resources and is now being included in the forthcoming Agriculture Bill. It is important that local policies reinforce this.

5. Energy

Unattractive renewables

Road transport is the largest CO₂ emitter in Oxfordshire and apparently only 26% of our energy is not from fossil fuels. There is a long way to go to 56% by 2030 and 100% by 2050. As mentioned before, NNGO considers that much more effort can be put into improving the energy efficiency of new housing – and updating other property. New electric or hydrogen powered vehicles and more storage systems are needed. ‘Local Energy Oxfordshire’⁵ is a promising arrangement and should be supported.

Missing infrastructure

Wireless charging of vehicles as they use roads is one approach. Maintenance and paying for these systems and the power may be problematical.

Wasted energy

Waste heat systems can help, but it is difficult to identify major sources in Oxfordshire. Maybe thermal imaging of properties could help to do this?

6. Circular economy

Current business models focus on makers, products and consumers, but they leave out the impact on the planet.

Doughnut economics⁶ reminds us of the planetary boundaries that we are exceeding. We are beyond the boundaries for Climate change, Biodiversity loss, Land conversion and Nitrogen/Phosphorus loading. Other boundaries are Air pollution, Ozone layer depletion, Ocean acidification, Chemical pollution and Freshwater withdrawals.

Unhelpful business models

We are heavy users of the World’s resources. Throwaway attitudes have developed. Businesses could help by making products that last longer and which can be repaired, repurposed or easily recycled. Taxation might guide this?

Underutilised things

Sharing and renting items would avoid waste and be better for the planet. Local reuse and repair schemes could develop these ideas.

⁵ <https://project-leo.co.uk/>

⁶ <http://www.doughnuteconomics.org/>



Planning for Real **NEED not Speculator **GREED** in
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