



Oxfordshire Strategic Vision Consultation, Dec 2020 - NNGO Response

Need not Greed Oxfordshire (NNGO) supports the principle of establishing a strategic vision for Oxfordshire, to sit above the plethora of plans and programmes we are facing, many of which appear to be originating from outside the county.

We found the draft vision to contain much to applaud, recognising as it does the need to balance the environmental, social and economic conditions across our county. In particular we were pleased to see a desire to address the inequalities that so many experience.

Vision must extend to scale of growth

It is misleading however to position the document as a ‘Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire’ when it explicitly omits the ‘quantum of housing or economic growth for Oxfordshire’ which is having such a detrimental impact across our landscape and many existing communities. Without this, the words risk becoming meaningless ‘motherhood and apple pie’.

In the report to OGB from Bev Hindle on 30th October 2020 it states (point 7) ‘Having a ‘whole system’ agreed vision to help align our work’. We agree this is absolutely critical and it therefore makes no sense to us not to be absolutely transparent with Oxfordshire residents around the scale of growth planned by explaining this in the vision. England’s Economic Heartland and Ox Cam Arc documents refer to doubling the size of the economy and one describes ‘limitless opportunities’. As is increasingly understood, there are limits to growth and replacing the natural world with built environments and infrastructure has been a major contributor to the climate catastrophe we are facing globally.

We know from local election results in 2019 and feedback from our members that many residents in Oxfordshire do not want the scale of growth planned for our county but would prefer to see organic population and economic growth, respecting the countryside as a means of food production and critical to the health and well being of people and wildlife.

There are, in our view, two fundamental omissions from the list of Challenges & Opportunities presented.¹ They are:

- a. Limits to Growth
- b. Local Democracy

Limits to Growth

Oxfordshire's thriving economy is underpinned by its natural environment and landscapes, and its diverse urban and rural character. Twisting this environment and character until it is beyond recognition would represent a serious threat to a long-term healthy economy. As the Vision itself recognises, these factors are all inter-linked.

A policy based solely on driving up Oxfordshire's contribution to the national economy, to the detriment of many existing residents and the natural environment, might work in the short-term but would have profound long-term consequences.

Encouraging people to move from affordable homes, where there are few jobs, to expensive Oxfordshire will not help to level up the UK which is supposed to be government policy. The prevailing economic thinking of unconstrained growth is now being challenged across the world including by an Oxford University Economist, Kate Raworth, and the Doughnut Economics framework for sustainable development.²

The Vision's definition of 'good growth' must therefore extend to recognising that there are limits and constraints to the levels of growth envisaged.

Local Democracy

The public response to the initial consultation on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 said that it wanted the Plan to be 'more Oxfordshire-specific and reflective of local people's views'.³

Results at the last local elections (particularly in South and Vale) showed clearly that the public want councillors to ditch excessive growth plans. The intervention of the Secretary of State, the Right Hon Robert Jenrick, in this process has been deeply concerning to NNGO.

¹ See section 3.1 [Strategic Vision Engagement Draft](#), Oxon Growth Board, 30 Oct 2020

² See: doughnuteconomics.org

³ Para 1.6 [Strategic Vision Engagement Draft](#), Oxon Growth Board, 30 Oct 2020

We are also concerned about the low level of public involvement that the OpenThought consultation is likely to achieve. A better option might be a People's Assembly where the scale of growth and its impacts could be more thoroughly considered and assessed.

OxCam Arc

At the same time as the Oxfordshire public are being asked its views on the county's future Vision, the OxCam Arc Leaders' Group, supported by our local authority leaders (indeed, chaired by Cllr Barry Wood, leader of Cherwell District Council) is already promoting a vision of 'disproportionate growth' across the OxCam Arc. This risks being a total sellout, offering up our county for development in the hope of Government funding, irrespective of the views of local people.

Oxfordshire authorities should follow the example of Buckinghamshire Council that has withdrawn from the Arc process in order "to be in control of its own future economic development and housing decisions, rather than potentially have these imposed upon it by votes from other areas as far away as Corby and the Fenlands."⁴

The Vision's definition of good growth must include provision for encouraging and supporting local democracy and respecting the wishes of local residents.

The stated guiding principle of 'We will proactively and positively engage and collaborate beyond Oxfordshire' should be clear that this will not extend to losing control of Oxfordshire's economic and housing decisions to outside influences, in particular the aggressive growth agenda of the OxCam Arc.

Regarding **Climate Change** - the aspirational outcome '*We will be the first generation to leave Oxfordshire's natural environment in a better state than that in which we found it.*' is extremely misleading. How can this be achievable when significant areas of natural environment will be replaced by houses, businesses and infrastructure for the huge population growth planned with very significant levels of CO2 released into the atmosphere for construction? The effects of such large-scale development also run completely counter to the concept and implementation of properly connected Nature Recovery Networks.

⁴ Cllr Martin Tett, Leader, Buckinghamshire Council press statement, 11 October 2020

Regarding **Housing Affordability** - It is now widely recognised that house prices are at the level they are due to a complex combination of factors including low interest rates and a huge uptake in buy to let ownership driving would be first time buyers into the rented sector. Building more houses in excess of actual need, whilst also stimulating economic growth in our region, will not make housing more affordable. There absolutely is a need to fix this issue but it requires difficult policy choices⁵.

NNGO would like to see our local authorities taking more control of building council houses and houses for social rent to meet the needs of current residents, challenging the existing system with its focus on maximising profits for land owners and house builders. We appreciate that many of the levers to achieve this lie with national government but Oxfordshire's local authorities need to challenge this head on - and the Growth Board now has a mixed enough political spectrum to make something possible.

In addition there needs to be a much greater focus on maximising the potential of our existing housing stock, including retrofitting to much higher energy / environmental standards.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these points in more detail as we do believe an overarching vision is a good idea. It must though be transparent to the electorate about the scale of growth and feature the many negative impacts on this, as well as the positive ones, and not shy away from being honest about the choices being made for Oxfordshire by elected leaders.



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

Coalition Secretariat, c/o CPRE Oxfordshire, First Floor, 20 High Street, Watlington, Oxon OX49 5PY.

Website: www.neednotgreedoxon.org.uk

E: info@neednotgreedoxon.org.uk

⁵ See *The Property Ladder - the Hidden Reality behind the Housing Crisis*- Bob Colenutt, Policy Press, 2020