

A Vision for Oxfordshire's Future

This paper sets out principles which the POETS group suggests should guide Oxfordshire's development. Its aim is to stimulate discussion about how best to achieve a sustainable future for the county.

"This paper was largely written prior to the emergence of Covid-19. While we hope that the effects will be relatively short lived for all, we also hope that the upheaval caused will provide a chance to reflect on how we would like to shape the future"

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POETS

(Planning Oxfordshire's Environment & Transport Sustainably)

Oxfordshire Today

1. Oxfordshire is a special county. At its heart is a city which people come from the world over to visit and to study in, with an internationally renowned university, unmatched architecture and a rightly celebrated landscape setting. The county boasts three Areas of Outstanding National Beauty (the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, and the North Wessex Downs), and is one of the most rural counties in South East England.
2. The county has one of the most successful economies in the UK. This is based in part on its strengths as a centre of learning and research. Economic success is also closely linked to the quality of Oxfordshire's environment.
3. But Oxfordshire has problems too. Along with the rest of the world, it faces a climate emergency. Despite being one of the wealthiest counties in the country it has high levels of homelessness, housing need, and poor quality housing, while those born in the most deprived areas of the county can expect to die years earlier than those in the least deprived.
4. Air quality is poor, particularly in urban areas, largely due to traffic, contributing to respiratory illness, particularly in children. Increasing traffic contributes to obesity and has limited children's independence – fewer now walk or cycle to school or play independently outside. These represent major problems for society generally - and huge costs for the NHS.
5. Existing infrastructure, such as some schools and health facilities, is crumbling. Potholed roads, uneven pavements and cracked cycle paths (where they even exist) are the norm.
6. For those without access to a car, particularly in rural parts of the county, there are very limited transport opportunities to travel for employment, health or leisure purposes.

POETS' vision

7. We consider that planning Oxfordshire's future should embrace the following principles:
 - a) *Climate*. All policies, funding and actions should be set in the context of the climate emergency, and be directed towards mitigating and adapting to climate change.
 - b) *Fairness* should be an overriding principle: people's life expectancy and children's freedom to play outdoors should not be determined by where they were born or live
 - c) *Health*. There should be an emphasis on opportunities for healthy lifestyles through day to day activities e.g. by providing safe and convenient walking or cycling routes
 - d) *Economy*. Jobs should be secure and pay at least the Oxford Living Wage. There should be a balance of jobs, not just in education, research and development (reflecting Oxfordshire's strengths), but also in a range of other sectors (care, agriculture etc.)
 - e) *High quality design* should be a guiding objective, for both individual buildings and urban spaces (which should be far more welcoming for pedestrians).
 - f) *Development* should be located so as to avoid sprawl, benefit from proximity to shared services, arranged to encourage the use of sustainable travel modes rather than private vehicles, and incorporate sustainable drainage and flood protection measures.
 - g) The focus should be on *access over mobility* – convenient access to the goods and services people need locally, rather than promoting ever-increasing levels of movement
 - h) *Transport*. In general, proposals for increasing road capacity on new or existing roads should be abandoned. Investment should be redirected to dramatic improvements for pedestrians and cyclists and public transport that can attract existing motorists out of their cars
 - i) *All new buildings* should be zero carbon and highly water-efficient. New housing should be focused on affordable and social housing that lower paid and key workers can afford.
 - j) *Electricity* generated locally from renewables should be dramatically increased by e.g. requiring all new buildings especially large warehouses and industrial buildings to incorporate photovoltaic panels on their roofs
 - k) *Biodiversity* should be protected and increased by rewilding, creating green corridors, etc. In line with the Government's 25 year plan for the environment, all development should demonstrate how it is going to lead to overall environmental gain
 - l) *Clean air* should be assured by all policies
 - m) *Access to green space and the countryside* should be readily available to all, wherever they live
 - n) *Democracy*. Plans should be determined by democratically elected, clearly accountable representatives and involve effective public engagement e.g. through citizens' panels.

Where we seem to be going

8. Some believe that Oxfordshire's interests are best served by "growth" – *economic* growth as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). This is the thinking behind the "Oxford Cambridge Arc" – a shaky notion supposedly built on linking two university cities, but seemingly designed to further overheat the South East economy at the expense of other regions and the environment.
9. Leading politicians of all political persuasions have acknowledged that GDP is an extremely poor measure of what people value, largely ignoring such things as quality of community life, beautiful landscapes and buildings, open space or biodiversity.
10. GDP has never been a good measure of the wellbeing of society or the environment. However, it is potentially disastrous in the face of a climate emergency, when increased use of fossil fuels and the resulting rise in carbon emissions count towards GDP growth.
11. High levels of growth will require the excavation of many millions more tonnes of minerals – sand and gravel from the river valleys, and limestone from the Cotswolds and other areas. They will require new supplies of water, almost certainly entailing a massive new reservoir south of Abingdon. Building more roads, which will attract more traffic, will add to GDP – but they will be "roads to ruin", further clogging up neighbouring roads, and increasing pollution and severance of communities.
12. Moreover, if what makes Oxfordshire's environment special becomes compromised by "anyplace" development the county will lose one of its unique assets, both in terms of its economy and generally.
13. All this suggests that pursuing a "business as usual" (or even worse a dash for growth) approach, albeit one accompanied by a few comforting words about aiming to address climate change or protect the environment, is simply not tenable. Oxfordshire should demand a radically better future.

How can our vision be funded?

14. Some will disagree with what we propose, and others will argue that these principles are all very well, but are simply unaffordable.
15. However, consider the following:
 - a) The authorities are currently patently unable to maintain the county's existing infrastructure, with a massive and growing backlog
 - b) The Oxfordshire Growth Board has estimated that its plans require £9bn spending on new infrastructure, much of it for new roads. So far, only a tiny fraction of this has been secured.
 - c) Building new roads will generate more traffic, as both Conservative and Labour governments acknowledged some 30 years ago, and is thus ultimately counter-productive
 - d) The cost of providing sustainable infrastructure such as walking, cycling and public transport is less than road building. For example, the cost of the ambitious cycling strategy for the whole of Greater Manchester (an 1,800 mile network) is predicted as £1.4bn – the same as that recently agreed for just ten miles of new dual carriageway near Bedford.
16. Perhaps more importantly, as the [Stern Review](#) in 2006 the future financial costs of *not* addressing the climate emergency will be far greater than the cost of investing now.
17. The need to address climate change provides tremendous scope for new businesses and jobs. This is an area of the economy which Oxfordshire is particularly well-placed to exploit.
18. Many of the changes we advocate involve helpful synergies. For example, encouraging people to walk and cycle can improve health and wellbeing, lead to cleaner air, less cost to the NHS and reduce climate impacts – all for relatively low levels of spend.
19. Financial incentives and other measures will be an indispensable part of the move towards meeting climate change targets. While some of these may require action by central government (e.g. regulations on the energy-efficiency of buildings) there is also scope for local leadership and initiatives. For example, local authorities in some parts of the country have invested pension funds to directly benefit their areas.
20. The climate emergency demands change, but we believe that the changes required could be hugely positive, and create a more civilised as well as more sustainable county for both current and future generations.

We welcome discussion and debate about the ideas in this paper.

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