Messages for Politicians in an Election Year

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David Young and Julie Martin of POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) look at recent development in Oxfordshire– and set out their New Year hopes for the County.

Every day brings news of crumbling public infrastructure (schools, roads, hospitals, and scandalously even sewerage), and of assaults on our national assets such as open space, countryside, farmland and biodiversity.

For this new year, and with forthcoming national and local elections, POETS look at what is happening in Oxfordshire.

Over the last couple of decades, in a failed attempt to offset government cuts to public services, Oxfordshire has chased economic growth at almost any cost, damaging itself, and indeed our planet. Much of this growth, and the changes that come with it, has been very controversial, provoking political changes in some cases. At the same time, there has been a failure to look after existing assets properly. Oxfordshire is still (just) a special, and a thriving place, but increasingly its prosperity is not equally shared, with pockets of real deprivation in some areas.

We have reviewed this situation against the **priorities** for fair and sustainable planning of development and transport. These priorities embrace the need for fairness and equity in service delivery and availability of suitable housing. They centre on properly addressing the climate emergency and good public health.

We have two main messages for our politicians as we head into an election year.

Our first message is that there is an alarming gap between what politicians say they are striving to do and what actually happens on the ground. This is hardly surprising, with successive governments trumpeting their aspirations but not delivering, very often because they chronically underfund our public services.

The five district councils are currently at varying stages in the production of new **local plans** to guide development to around 2040. The latest draft of the Oxford Local Plan still chases massive employment growth in and around the city and uses a deliberately inflated figure of housing need. It expects the surrounding districts to accommodate the resulting housing overspill. Cherwell is following a similar chase for growth and (so far) seems willing to pick up much of this overspill. South, Vale and West are taking a more circumspect approach that may result in lower planned growth rates. Compared with likely future build rates, all have more than adequate housing allocations in existing plans. A key problem is that most of it is not affordable by those on middle to lower incomes, including those providing essential public services.

Most recent housing is private housing (often on University and college land holdings) and very little of it is anywhere near genuinely affordable. Social housing is almost invisible. This is mainly due to central government policy which depletes the social housing stock (through the 'right to buy') and places reliance on the large private house builders, who have a vested interest in keeping prices high. Much of the new housing that is built attracts further commuting. Meantime, local people on average incomes struggle for decent accommodation and employers often cannot fill vacancies.

This alarming disconnect is also striking in the transport sector. The county council has ambitious policies in its **Local Transport and Connectivity Plan** (LTCP 5) to discourage the growth of car use and encourage active travel and public transport. This is the right way to go for reasons of equity, health, and climate. But these policies are routinely ignored in practice. The allocation of money – and indeed space – bears little or no relation to the stated priorities of walking, cycling and public transport. Cycle accident rates are concerning and bus services and use have declined. Lack of routine highway maintenance is now endemic (not least on cycle routes and pavements) and there is huge public concern over potholes.

Many problems are down to lack of money, and micro-managing handouts from Westminster – but some aren't. These include the acute disruption along the length of Botley Road which surely cries out for more robust action and coordination.

Then there is the new road proposal from the A34 near Didcot across the Thames to the A4074 Oxford-Henley road. This is now due to be decided by central government after a public inquiry in spring. If approved, it will result in yet more traffic, conflict with the council's own transport plan, and send out all the wrong messages. As it is not fully funded there are huge financial as well as reputational risks for the county council. If it were to apply its own policies, it would bring forward a less damaging and cheaper scheme based on public transport and active travel instead.

Our second message is that, more than ever, we need a truly **joined up approach.** Many local problems flow from cuts to local government. Nationally, there also appears to be increasing dishonesty around the will and/or ability to implement policies, particularly green policies. Financial restrictions will no doubt continue – all the more reason for hard-pressed local politicians to implement a properly joined up approach.

On **housing**, social housing provision must be improved. A concentration on market housing in a highly attractive area such as Oxfordshire simply draws people into the county and increases existing pressures. Paradoxically, additional social housing, with more input from smaller, local builders, could bring real competition into the market, potentially slowing price growth.

All housing needs to be energy efficient and carbon-neutral. Most needs to be on brownfield sites, in urban areas and within walking and cycling distance from workplaces and services, or on frequent public transport routes. It would also help if the University and its colleges were to apply their huge wealth of knowledge and expertise to helping improve the quality of life in Oxfordshire (and the planet) rather than simply seeking to maximise profits from development.

Getting housing in the right places avoids sprawl, helps accessibility and keeps **transport** demands lower**.** Active travel helps improve people's health.

Indeed, **public health** has recently been much neglected. Obesity and (the directly related) growth of diabetes and other avoidable conditions are overwhelming the NHS. Strong public health messages are lacking. And the pockets of serious deprivation in our relatively prosperous county have to be addressed.

The good thing is that what helps public health, also generally helps the **climate emergency.** This must increasingly be the main focus of attention. And, we also have to pay heed to biodiversity, pollution, rewilding, open space and (not least) food security.

We need to live within our means. Public opinion is beginning to change from a growth-at-any-cost approach to a more balanced approach, away from a fixation on GDP. One of the new ways of taking such a balanced approach is known as Doughnut Economics. This was developed locally a decade ago by Kate Raworth, originally for Oxfam. It is now being used as a basis for plan-making in major cities and regions worldwide. The central message is that we should meet human needs within the limits of what is genuinely sustainable.

Today in Oxfordshire we have the knowledge and ability to take up this sort of approach – and above all to be an exemplar on how to address climate change locally.