

Unelected bodies are deciding Oxfordshire's future

Unelected bodies have become increasingly influential in proposals for future development in Oxfordshire. They are currently promoting plans for unprecedented levels of growth and which take little account of the climate emergency or the needs of the environment. At the same time little attention is paid to meeting local needs.

These are some of the key findings of a new report by POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably), a group of planning, environmental and transport experts. They highlight the role being played by:

- The National Infrastructure Commission, which is promoting major growth in the Oxford to Cambridge "arc", including doubling Oxfordshire's population by 2050
- Highways England, a government company promoting a motorway standard "expressway" across this area
- England's Economic Heartland, a made-up area which overlaps with the arc, and again is promoting major development
- The Oxfordshire Local Economic Partnership (LEP), which contains some local authority appointed members although they are outnumbered by other interests. Amongst other things this body has produced a "Local Industrial Strategy" which has to be taken into account by local planning authorities in preparing their local plans
- The Oxfordshire Growth Board. While this involves the leaders of the county and five district councils, they are not directly elected, and the board also contains representatives of other interests
- Homes England, the government's self-styled "housing accelerator". It is advocating major housing growth, notably on land it owns at Chalgrove, in a location badly served by public transport and poorly located for travel by bike or on foot.

It is difficult if not impossible for ordinary members of the public to influence or in some cases even gain access to these bodies. Highways England for instance has notoriously persuaded some local authorities to sign agreements forbidding them to disclose information about its planning for the expressway. England's Economic Heartland has restricted information on its transport planning to selected partners who happen to be major construction and engineering firms.

The POETS report points out that the increasing influence of such bodies carries risks both for the future of Oxfordshire and for local democracy itself. Chris Cousins, one of the report's authors, said, "We are concerned that ordinary people feel increasingly disenfranchised from the planning process. Anyone who is concerned about climate change, for example, will find little to reassure them that these unelected bodies are proposing substantive action to address it.

“Despite professing support for local decision-making, central government has reduced both the power and the resources available to directly elected local authorities. The creeping growth of unelected organisations is unhealthy for our democracy.

“We need government at all levels to give priority to tackling the climate emergency. This should involve empowering directly elected local authorities, and enabling us as citizens both to contribute and to hold our elected representatives to account.”

NB The report is available to view at

www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets_democratic_deficit_report_081219.pdf

on the POETS website, www.poetsplanningoxon.uk

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