

Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny meeting 7th March 2019  
Agenda Item 6, The Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

Thank you for letting me speak tonight.

As per my correspondence earlier this week, I'm here as a resident and microbusiness owner in West Oxfordshire and I wholeheartedly support the recommendation in the report in front of you that West Oxfordshire should respond to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation.

The Oxon 2050 Plan is welcome in principle. It has the potential to provide a coordinated and cohesive strategic plan across the county and actively involving Oxfordshire residents in the choices to be made. And there are some excellent councillors and officers from this District represented in the structure and leading the project.

So far so good. However there are a number of significant issues that need to be meaningfully considered and urgently addressed.

One of the key issues of concern from the start, in all the documentation from the Statement of Common Ground for the Growth Board through to the more recent Scoping Document for the Plan, has been what the stated objective is, and who this Plan is actually for. Basically it is economic growth. And not necessarily economic growth for Oxfordshire's residents and communities.

And much mention is made about sustainability. But to slightly misquote a central character from Rob Reiner's movie *The Princess Bride*: "That word they keep using, I do not think it means what they think it does".

Issues such as social cohesion, the value of ecosystem services, and what scale of growth can be accommodated by various natural resources without depletion or harm over time, underpin every aspiration and objective being explored for the 2050 Plan. Yet environmental and social considerations are continually relegated to how impacts on them can be mitigated, rather than seeing them as the central pillars that they actually are for our county and our communities.

To illustrate - I asked a question at the latest Growth Board meeting about "What practical measures will you be taking to get people with the right skills sets round the table to ensure a robust process to achieve sustainable development?" I had hoped for something along the lines that had been done for healthy place-shaping at the previous meeting, whereby they had embedded officers, consultants or informed stakeholders with specific remit (and skillset) for healthy place-shaping in the Growth Board substructures, and had committed that the principle of healthy place-shaping would be given priority and due regard in the project process and all decision making.

I received a delayed, written, response to my question today and it is woeful. I will read it to you if I may?

*The principle of sustainable development is key to our ambitions for Oxfordshire. We don't want growth at any cost, we want good growth that's planned and managed*

*at a sustainable level, minimises environmental impacts, is inclusive and benefits everyone. This key principle will be enshrined in the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.*

So again – there is talk about *minimising* environmental impacts. And there are still no practical commitments or reassurances that the right skillsets are being put around the table in decision-making and planning, not just being accessed or contracted, no officers are being given specific remit for sustainability etc.

To also illustrate - the massively important national 25 year environment plan is barely mentioned, relegated only to a Topic Paper in this consultation.

The recent Sustainability Appraisal scoping report consultation document was so poor that even I – with rusty sustainability credentials - could pick holes in it. It was really not good at all.

Oh, the Growth Board response also went on to talk about engagement. (I didn't ask about engagement.)

As the CPRE document I recommended to you notes: this shouldn't be about how much development we can cram in over the next 30 years. It should be about what Oxfordshire actually needs and how that can best be accommodated over time, within its social and environmental limits.

As for issues close to this District's heart – briefly, hopefully you will share my own view that the documents that have come to you throughout the Plan process do not sufficiently recognise the importance of the rural or agri-economy, our landscape and countryside, and the rural *cultural* – as well as built - heritage that is vital to our communities in this part of the county. I can give examples, but in summary, the documents read as Oxford-centric, with economic growth and investment based on innovation and high-value, knowledge-based job creation. And the document recognises that infrastructure investment will be focused on areas of prioritised growth, so I am not sure how that will square with the investment that we need in this part of the county.

The Oxfordshire Plan shows interfaces with a number of other programmes and strategies, such as the OxCam Arc and Expressway and the LIS. These are being defined separately and without opportunity for input from yourselves, but will directly affect the scale, scope and spatial planning of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. The timescales for these are not dovetailed with that of the Plan, and the challenging deadlines being set are prohibiting any opportunity for meaningful debate. The recent bus roadshow for engagement had limited and, it seemed, rather last-minute publicity. James Mills' latest press release for the consultation came out this week, yet the deadline is looming on 25<sup>th</sup> March. The documents sent to you for approval that formed the basis of this consultation were not able to be amended by yourselves even if you had wanted to.

There is, I believe, also a potential – significant - issue of social equity here. Both within the county as well as how these plans are going to affect other parts of the UK. We are told that growth in Oxfordshire is vital for the UK economy as a whole, but there is no assessment of

how directing investment here will impact on areas elsewhere that may have far greater need for support and regeneration.

As it stands, this does not look like a plan for us – Oxfordshire residents of a rural county – but a plan for developers and big business, and for the Treasury.

Please come together, whatever party you may be aligned to, to have your say on this massively important strategy. Your response to this consultation will help set the priorities against which the whole of the rest of the Plan will be considered. There is talk of it being “at an early stage”, but the timescales are such that \*this\* is a critical stage in the process, potentially influencing the “difficult decisions” mentioned in the Plan documents. There are further papers likely to come out to you in preparation for the next consultation in June on the scale and locations of growth, and your intervention on these, before they get to public consultation, would also be welcome.

As mentioned before, specifically, I would be grateful if you could consider the following in drafting your response:

- Whether the Plan is going to meet the needs of your electorate here in West Oxfordshire, in particular whether the Plan will deliver on the long term needs of our local protected environment, communities and rural economy
- How local democracy and accountability is being delivered, and the impact and influence that growth strategies being defined in the LIS and other programmes will have on our District, and its capacity to have a voice in its own future
- How the timescales can be more effectively managed

Please help the Plan deliver a long term strategy that respects and reflects rural Oxfordshire and the voice and needs of local communities. These issues are, I know, also important to you.

I will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have, or - at the end of the evening - arrange to speak or meet with you individually on another occasion.

Thank you.

Sue Haywood

## Appendix B

Thank you all for allowing me the opportunity to address you at this time.

I'd like to start by saying I shouldn't really be here talking to you, that you really shouldn't be having this debate. Indeed, when I first raised this issue at the town council, many of my colleagues couldn't understand the need for it. One even suggested that we have standing orders that do not allow racism of any form so why should one interest group have its own rules? They said if we have this for one group, will we have to have a separate definition for all?

And they were right to ask that.

But sadly, times have changed.

While society's tolerance and acceptance of those of different skin tones, sexual preferences or religious beliefs have grown slowly over the years, we are seeing something happen in politics that we have never experienced before.

Social media has allowed for the spread of ideas on a level we could not comprehend just a decade ago. People who once felt alone are able to find others of their mind-set.

In most cases this is a good thing but has led to a proliferation of ideas while facts are often left behind

In this surge of new politics that have come out over the last 36 months we are seeing a rise in support for anti-capitalist ideas. This, coupled with awareness of actions of foreign governments has led to a rising number getting confused between questioning the actions of the Israeli government and the way in which Jewish people should be treated.

By the sharing of conspiracy theories, anti-Semitic tropes and the re-emergence of the type of blood libel not seen since Nazi Germany, instances of anti-Semitism here in the UK has seen a record rise while other forms of racism have seen an overall decline.

Some of our more senior politicians are openly sharing platforms with and promoting the works of those who push these tropes and encourage hatred of Jewish people often hiding it under a thin veil "anti-capitalism" or "pro Palestine"

This has reached the stage where MPs are quitting parties over the abuse and death threats they have received from their own members.

This Council will see an election this May. Some of those who have expressed an interest in standing have promoted what they may have thought were anti-capitalist or pro Palestine ideas when in fact, the images and/or posts are simply anti-Semitic. And yet the rules council uses to address racism would sadly be insufficient to hold them to account if they became cllrs because the line is blurred.

This definition of anti-Semitism sets out where that line is drawn.

Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to make sure you have the frame work in place now, the tide is already high and we as a community should do all we can to protect ourselves from it

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### **Call-in of Cabinet decision regarding Cotswolds AONB Management Plan to Economic and Social Overview & Scrutiny Committee 7<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

#### **Jim Clemence, Trustee, Friends of the West Oxfordshire Cotswolds**

I am speaking as a trustee of the Friends of the West Oxfordshire Cotswolds, representing some AONB residents and in support of the work of the Cotswolds Conservation Board, whose member is not permitted to speak today. The Board would be pleased if you would refer this back to the Cabinet and to have further discussion.

I would like to quickly comment on the Council's decision not to endorse the ambition to promote the Cotswolds as the Walking and Exploring Capital of England. I think WODC, Cotswolds Tourism and the AONB Board are 100% agreed that they wish to promote walking and exploring in the AONB. The Board's ambition is not overreaching. The Cotswolds has more public rights of way than the large National Parks, is much more accessible and has some of the highest visitor numbers. The Board is not asking WODC to adopt this ambition as *its* policy nor is it forcing anyone else to adopt this as a marketing slogan. WODC is the only Cotswolds authority to be refusing to endorse this.

Turning to the National Park it is clearly felt there has been a lack of consultation but the timetable was not the Board's. The Government launched a review into National Park and AONB designations in May, appointing a panel of experts, and that review itself ran a full consultation which closed in December. At the same time the Board was renewing its Management Plan which was also in consultation. The Government review is expected to report this autumn and if the Government takes up a recommendation to designate some new National Parks, there will of course be a full consultation. I suggest there will be ample opportunity then for WODC and other authorities to contribute.

There is much about a National Park which many Councillors might support. Cohesion in overall vision for the Cotswolds, coordination and a powerful brand in promotion of the area's tourism, more support for sustainable agriculture. The main contentions appear to be planning responsibility and development impact on the rest of the district.

The review was born against a national background of increasing AONB development. Government policy has opened up AONBs to speculative development when district housing supply falls short and has created pressures, such as New Homes Bonus, to deliver housing at all costs. Coinciding with the National Parks' 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this review is a once in a many generation opportunity. Yes, our new Local Plan is clear that the AONB should not be developed to meet general district housing needs, but developers are already arguing that the plan does not deliver and for these policies to be set aside.

A National Park plan would be more robust. The major benefit would be an overall gain in planning control not a change in who has control. This control would give the capacity to bring forward acceptable sites to meet genuine local need in rural communities. It would provide a coherent plan for the landscape area and equip the AONB to deal with future challenges.

WODC would still be involved in National Park planning. The South Downs model has attractions but there are many potential alternatives. There would always be local councillor planning committee representation and whatever model might be preferred, it is an assumption on all sides that there would be no negative financial impact on Local Authorities.

The concern that National Park status for the AONB will result in more development outside the AONB does not bear scrutiny. The Local Plan already allocates all district-wide housing need to areas outside the AONB with the AONB meeting local need. There is no aspiration to turn the AONB into a museum. Equally it is not for commuter development.

A number of councillors felt that a National Park would result in less local decision making but National Parks have a good record in promoting Neighbourhood Planning, which WODC could do more of. It is open to question how much influence local communities feel they currently have in decision making.

There are also clear arguments for coordinating AONB planning. We need qualified landscape officers and we need expertise in applying AONB Policy, for example regarding major development.

The National Park ambition is of course the Board's and not WODC's. The Board is clearly frustrated at its inability to deliver its purpose with a shrinking budget and in reliance on Local Authorities facing significant development pressures. West Oxfordshire has itself dismissed a number of strong Board objections to major AONB planning proposals. If the Board's argument is one sided I think that reflects the fact that from the AONB's perspective the argument is compelling. The Board has highlighted some potential disadvantages and is happy to investigate these further with you.

Finally some Councillors have suggested the national park proposal is not popular. I think those that will be canvassing in the AONB in coming weeks may find otherwise. Perhaps some who have called this in already are.

We genuinely hope WODC feels the proposal for a National Park could be explored further given the significant opportunity it presents for the AONB and its communities.