

# Wantage and Grove Campaign Group



## Oxfordshire Open Thought

August 2020

This is our submission to the consultation on how we shape our county as part of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

### Introduction

- 1) This submission covers the following points:
  - a) Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group
  - b) Our feedback on the subjects raised in the Open Thought Consultation:
    - i) Introduction
    - ii) Living and Working
      - (1) Sustainable communities
      - (2) Achieving sustainable lifestyles
      - (3) Oxfordshire's natural assets
    - iii) Climate Change
      - (1) Carbon reduction
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      - (3) Saving water
      - (4) Biodiversity
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      - (1) Connecting everything
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      - (3) Improving bus services
      - (4) Improving opportunities for safer cycling
      - (5) Main day-to-day needs within a 15 minute walk?
      - (6) Personalise freight
      - (7) Improving internet connectivity

### Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

- 2) We are the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group, a non-party-political group of over 1000 individuals who live in and around Wantage and Grove (mainly in the OX12 postcode area) in Oxfordshire. We are not against any development in Wantage and Grove but:
  - a) Developments should be proportionate and sustainable; and
  - b) The infrastructure should enhance and improve quality of life for its residents.

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- 3) We have seen no changes in infrastructure in OX12 (other than a reduction in bus services to our villages and the removal of adult and children's services) since the last Oxfordshire Plan was written.

### **Our feedback on how we shape our county as part of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050..**

#### **i) Introduction**

- 4) Plans for Oxfordshire assume Oxfordshire's interests are best served by "growth" – economic growth as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Yet many leading politicians 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. Surely Oxfordshire 2050 should have an emphasis on opportunities for healthy lifestyles through day to day activities not simply focus on economic growth and this requires a strategy which allows residents to easily access employment, schools, health and leisure activities.
- 5) Please ensure that Oxfordshire 2050 and any related documents take into account the impact of the Coronavirus on the local, national and international economy, Oxfordshire growth forecasts, any potential change in age related population distribution and any changes in behaviour.
- 6) A holistic approach. The Oxfordshire 2050 plan has to be the place which balances decisions taken by County, District and Local Councils and ensures that plans provide a holistic solution to the demands of Oxfordshire. If, for example, social services are reduced then funding for the voluntary sector and transport services to those facilities which still exist is crucial. Similarly, it should be recognised that bus gates in Oxford reduce the ability of residents in rural communities (with no access to bus services) and those with reduced mobility to use the facilities of Oxford City.

#### **ii) Living and Working**

- 7) The headlines state that Oxfordshire is home to some 680,000 people and over 30,000 enterprises spread over market towns and rural villages, iconic cultural places like Blenheim Palace, Oxford and its colleges, areas of outstanding beauty including the Chilterns, Cotswolds and the North Wessex Downs; our county has a diverse and wonderful mix of areas of natural beauty and world leading scientific facilities. Please remember when planning that Oxford City has a population of just over 150,000 (about 20% of the population of the County) but tends to attract a much higher percentage of the investment. Many of our rural communities have no facilities and high levels of deprivation and in these the picture isn't quite so rosy.
- 8) We have a severe lack of affordable homes which has not been addressed in past plans and strategies and this has a significant impact on the ability to attract key workers such as teachers and health and care staff. Addressing this problem must be a key part of any future plan.

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- 9) The headlines also state that there is a need to accommodate growth whilst protecting and enhancing Oxfordshire's special natural and historic environments. We believe that there is a need for a full and open public debate about the levels of growth being pursued for the county and the subsequent implications.

There was an increase in jobs in the County up to the crisis, but these included low paid, part time, temporary and zero hours roles and uncertain self-employment. The Government has stated that investment will be spent on levelling up every part of the United Kingdom, while strengthening the ties that bind it together. This is likely to mean more investment in the North of England and other relatively deprived areas, not in successful areas like Oxfordshire and the South East.

- 10) Oxfordshire has a higher than average older population and any significant increase in the working population could only come from in-migration which, given the new immigration policies, implies that other parts of the country would lose skilled workers, further widening the gaps between different parts of the UK. This is not sustainable.
- 11) We have long advocated the need for more facilities for older people. The number of older people in Oxfordshire will continue to rise at a much faster rate than any other section of the population and if older people are to thrive in their communities, enjoy a good quality of life, and be able to access the facilities, services and care that they need then this must be a key component of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

### Sustainable communities

- 12) If Oxfordshire's population continues to grow and the number of new homes built (not planned) continues to grow at the current rate then the infrastructure identified by the Growth Board Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS) report in 2017 will be required and the £8.5 billion funding gap for the necessary infrastructure to support planned housing growth to 2040 must be plugged. Only £500 million had been identified at the time and infrastructure and services have not kept up with the pace of growth. The OxIS report acknowledges that "Pressure on the existing health and social care sector is acute and will continue to grow" and that "the growth in journeys by road and rail has not been matched by sufficient government investment to enhance the network."
- Given that the plan will now be extended to 2050 additional funding will also be required and any plan which doesn't address this issue is simply not worth the paper it is written on.
- 13) Any sustainable community in 2050 must have the infrastructure required, be carbon neutral, support biodiversity and contribute to the growth of the country as a whole. The infrastructure required (transport, health, social services, education, emergency services, utilities, flood defences, green infrastructure and waste services) will need to be funded.
- In Oxfordshire any community is likely to have a significant percentage of older people who need to be fully integrated into the community and supported with the care that they need. Any plan for the future must tackle these issues.
- 14) The statement that "What if...Everyone in Oxfordshire had access to good quality jobs,

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education and healthcare? What if crime rates were lowered and everyone felt safe and secure where they live/work/play? What if barriers to housing were removed and everyone benefited from high quality living environments that supported active and healthy lifestyles? What if everyone working in Oxfordshire earned at least a living wage and could benefit from an equal, long life expectancy? Sounds very like Alice in Wonderland.

We know that Alice in Wonderland was written in Oxford but an Oxfordshire 2050 must have some basis in reality.

2020 to 2050 is a 30 year timeframe with a limited amount of funding and problems with the current quality and quantity of social housing, health and social care, transport infrastructure, leisure facilities and education. If those issues could be addressed then this might be a plan which we could support.

### **Achieving sustainable lifestyles**

- 15) Even if all new buildings (not just new homes) were built to be zero carbon, existing buildings would remain high emitters. Achieving a zero carbon target requires much more than tinkering with several thousand new buildings each year. The sections below on climate change attempt to consider some of the issues but the basic problem is that existing buildings and lifestyles have a high carbon footprint and changing that will require much more investment than is feasible.
- 16) Part of the plan may be to improve the health and wellbeing of the communities in Oxfordshire but in the post Covid-19 world even this requires more investment in health and social services, leisure facilities and biodiversity than is likely to be possible.
- 17) Any plan must be practical and achievable with a clear understanding of the issues facing the county and country now and over the next 30 years and a supportable strategy for addressing them.

### **Oxfordshire's natural assets**

- 18) Oxfordshire includes a large Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (ANOB) to the south of the county which, luckily, local policies can do little to ruin. It also includes several globally important chalk streams and a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Oxfordshire has nearly 44,000 acres of woodland in total (6.9% of its area) including approximately 20 areas of ancient woodland.
- 19) The river Thames meanders through the county and it (and its tributaries) are often subject to pollution from commercial enterprises (including the water companies). It has recently been reported that the Thames has some of the highest recorded levels of micro-plastics for any river in the world.
- 20) No mention of any of these natural assets is included in the documentation relating to this consultation.
- 21) Space to wander, exercise and be refreshed have proved crucial for residents in the Covid-19

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lockdown and should be preserved and enhanced for the future. Footpaths should be widened to all for social distancing (not just single file walking) and greenways should be introduced across the county. More detail is included in the biodiversity section below.

### iii) Climate Change

#### Carbon Reduction

22) Moving to a zero carbon future requires a reduction in emissions from buildings and transport and a way of capturing the carbon in the atmosphere.

a) Make all new buildings zero carbon

We are continuing to build new homes and offices with minimum insulation and gas fired heating. This is mad and there should be an immediate change in policy to require all new buildings to be carbon neutral.

b) Identify better ways of improving the carbon footprint of existing buildings

Oxfordshire has some of the best brains in the country and finding a cost-efficient way of reducing the carbon footprint of existing buildings has to be possible. Retrofitting older homes with heat source technology would mean replacing all existing radiators; making homes energy efficient means replacing all windows, adding insulation to walls, roofs and floors and is way beyond the budgets of most home owners - even replacing existing boilers can be costly. We have to find an alternative.

c) Practical locations

We are building new homes many miles from employment sites with no facilities to allow people to work from home at least part of the time. Health, education, leisure and community facilities are also distanced.

All new homes must be built within walking/cycle distance of employment sites and other facilities or near efficient bus or rail links. One service an hour by bus or train is not sufficient to allow people to commute or access other facilities without using their own transport.

We also believe that the updated Oxfordshire walking and cycling design standards should be made mandatory for all existing and future developments.

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### d) Reduced Carbon Transport

Whilst we support a move to lower carbon transport we are concerned about the impact which a major increase in electric powered vehicles could have on the environment through the need to mine the oceans for cobalt (a key component of the batteries). This could have a yet unquantified impact on the environment which might have been clarified at the 2020 United Nations Ocean Conference, which was scheduled to take place from 2 to 6 June in Lisbon, but has been postponed.

There is work being performed by the Oxfordshire Hydrogen Hub to develop hydrogen-fuelled transport fleets. Hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles, including passenger cars and buses, are powered by electricity and so produce no carbon dioxide or other harmful emissions from their tailpipe – only water vapour. In these vehicles, energy is stored in the form of compressed hydrogen fuel, rather than in a battery.

This approach seems to have much less of an environmental impact and still achieves the carbon reductions required and, we believe, could be much better for the planet than a focus on electric battery vehicles.

### e) Carbon Capture

The most obvious way of capturing carbon is by planting trees, and adding a fruit tree to the garden of every new home and trees to all open spaces and verges would be a very easy way to achieve this. Councils have been removing trees from public spaces to reduce costs but this is also removing a method of carbon capture and must be resisted.

## Air quality

23) Air quality is primarily driven by transport policies and the volume of transport. Improving air quality requires reducing the number of vehicles (HGVs and commercial vans as well as private vehicles) or reducing the emissions of the vehicles.

### a) Propose staggered working hours for commuters

Although the lockdown from Coronavirus has had a significant positive impact on air quality it is unlikely that this will continue to the same extent in the longer term, but a “new normal” where people work from home more of the time and where working hours are staggered could retain a positive effect. The 2050 plan should be to encourage employment areas to work staggered hours as much as possible to reduce the impact of peak travel.

### b) Discourage HGVs from using rural roads

Most of the air pollution in OX12 is caused by the volume of transport on our small rural roads, Thames Water tankers moving water and waste around the over-capacity system and the construction traffic related to housing developments and the dust created by construction work. Unless the number of HGVs on the roads is reduced and the amount of traffic and dust caused by construction sites is also reduced there is little chance of improvement in air quality.

If a Zero Emissions area can be set up in Oxford surely a means of charging HGV vehicles for using local routes instead of the motorway network could also be used. Given all the brains in Oxfordshire, it can't be beyond the realm of man to devise a means of updating the

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tachograph system to record where HGVs travel as well as when.

c) Create delivery hubs

Since the lockdown, many of us are shopping online and having things delivered, creating a large number of deliveries covering the same areas. Surely it can't be beyond the brains of some smart engineers to create local delivery hubs where all parcels to the same post code could be combined reducing the number of deliveries to each area. – wasn't this what the Post Office was set up to do?

We know that in Oxford there has been a big increase in 'last mile' delivery by cargo bike and other bike courier services, allowing for a more effective network of parcel delivery by bike. This may work well in Oxford City but has no impact on the smaller towns where such facilities are unlikely to be cost effective. Another alternative needs to be found.

### Saving water

24) Oxfordshire is becoming one of the drier counties in the country with rainfall coming in short heavy bursts. The availability of fresh water is crucial to life. It is very difficult and costly to retrofit old buildings with grey water recycling so much of the focus needs to be on the main infrastructure and new buildings.

a) Make water recycling mandatory in all new buildings

Grey water recycling, rainwater harvesting and other water efficiency measures should be mandatory for all new-builds as soon as possible. New commercial premises and housing developments should be required to incorporate recycling of water and where a significant part of water needs can be met with recycled water.

b) Ensure that runoff is captured and used

All hard standings must be either capable of capturing runoff and recycling it, or be permeable to ensure that it can feed nearby green infrastructure. SUDS should be used to provide water to the local community.

c) Ensure that all main water pipes are well maintained

As the population of the county increases it is essential that the main water pipes for both clean and waste water are well maintained. Putting increasing pressure on old cracked pipes just increases leakage and the frequency of burst pipes.

### Biodiversity

25) As we mentioned in the introduction, many leading politicians 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. Having an impact on climate change requires a focus on biodiversity as a core part of Oxfordshire 2050.

a) Well-designed green infrastructure

The aesthetic value of well-designed natural spaces and greater closeness to nature have proven benefits to people's health and mental wellbeing. Well-designed green

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infrastructure requires carefully designing new green spaces and enhancing existing roadside verges, cycle ways, bridleways, footpaths and canals. This must be built into any plan for the future.

### b) Benefits to people and communities

Increasing biodiversity also has benefits to people and communities, including noise reduction, improvements in air and water quality, sustainable drainage and future resilience to climate change. Features such as hedgerows, ponds, patches of woodland, meadows and marshes and routes for wildlife from one area to another, need to be treasured, retained and increased.

### c) Using Greenways

The idea mooted in the topic papers for the transport plan for making Public Rights of Way (PRoWs), minor rural roads, unsurfaced roads, canal towpaths, disused railway lines, cycle paths, parkland and areas of open countryside into high-quality dedicated cycling and walking corridors will also create bio-diversity corridors and should be a key part of connecting new developments to town centres, parks, schools, transport interchanges, leisure facilities etc..

### d) Creating and maintaining “green lungs”

Adding green lungs (trees) to existing smaller green spaces would increase biodiversity, reduce the amount of maintenance required and assist in reducing carbon. Adding bulbs (plant once and let them multiply) and trees to create miniature wild life areas which can be connected by a network of pathways and cycleways is a great way of adding biodiversity to our towns and villages. Adding seating areas so that communities can sit and enjoy them will encourage communal responsibility and ownership.

## Circular economy

26) We support the idea of building using recycled materials and also support projects like Sustainable Wantage which encourage recycling, repairing and up-cycling. Any funding support for encouraging this type of project is money well spent.

### iv) Connectivity

#### Connecting everything

27) The initial consultation for the Local Transport Plan proposes adding connectivity to the strategy, allowing people to replace journeys with communication, by working remotely, perhaps video-conferencing, seeing their doctor remotely or by 2050 by using virtual reality to see and operate things in their workplace wherever that might be as long as it is connected to the Internet.

Yet no mention is made of the need for children to attend school, all residents to attend health facilities and leisure facilities, the number of businesses which require physical presence to operate or the impact of isolation on the elderly and those less able. These will still need



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transport and this needs to be a key part of this strategy.

28) New development must be located in areas with good broadband connectivity but also physical employment opportunities, education, health, leisure and community facilities. It must have good walking and cycling links and good connectivity to public transport.

29) The idea of a small scale metro system allowing the re-allocation of space above ground for a people-focused “place” approach across the whole of the centre of Oxford and reaching out beyond the city boundary may be a good idea to attract funding but what benefit does it have for the large proportion of the Oxfordshire population who live in small villages and towns with no (or limited) bus service and poor internet connections?

Why assume that rural residents in Oxfordshire all want to travel into Oxford? The proposal that rural communities could be served by on-demand autonomous vehicles might work but this still requires a safe, well managed, maintained and more resilient highway network. We understand that car sharing works best in dense areas with constant demand – we are not sure how that might work in rural areas.

30) Supporting healthy place shaping requires people to be able to go about their lives with minimum use of motor vehicles. It requires work, play, health and education to be available within easy access on foot, cycle or fast public transport. If it remains easier and/or more convenient to use a private motor vehicle (either owned or shared) then human nature will ensure that that mode of transport is used.

### Using technology

31) Technological change can be good (hydrogen power, solar power, self-driving vehicles etc.) but the consequences can be unpredictable. On-line shopping is an excellent example – leading to loss of high street shops, increasing concentration on a limited number of suppliers, more delivery vans on the road and poor-quality jobs in the distribution industry. The result is customer satisfaction with easily accessible goods, but more social isolation. In the longer term, even the jobs in the warehouses and delivery network will be largely automated out of existence.

32) A significant proportion of the employment in Oxfordshire is technology related and much can be achieved through home working but other areas require workers to be on site for experiments and physical collaboration or construction (cars or buildings for example). The need for transport is not going to go away.

### Improving bus services

33) Improving bus services is a strategic transport priority for the County Council and for future new investment. We believe that this should focus on;

a) looking for opportunities to fund and develop demand responsive and rural services,

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- b) Improving interchange integration such as car and cycle parking facilities near rail services and other bus services at key points on the public transport network, (for example providing smaller parking areas / mini Park & Rides along main bus routes),
- c) Expanding the services to provide evening connectivity to town centres other than Oxford,
- d) Providing safer and more secure access to the bus network for pedestrians and cyclists and helping to integrate travel by sustainable, mixed mode options.

But we feel that the County should be continuing to influence the development planning process, especially through Local Plans, to promote development which limits the need for transport as much as possible.

- 34) The Oxfordshire bus network is currently based mainly on Oxford City radial routes, linking to the main county towns, and within growth areas linked to new development. Away from this core network, particularly in towns and rural areas, commercial services are difficult to justify and recent funding cuts have reduced the bus offer in many areas.

Yet if the County is committed to a zero carbon future it needs to provide services which encourage more journeys by bus and using developer contributions to link new developments on a roundabout route won't increase usage by those eager to get to commercial nodes such as town or shopping centres, leisure facilities such as cinemas and cafes, transport hubs (rail stations etc.) or health facilities.

For example a new service is proposed linking developments on the outskirts of Wantage to developments in Hanney and Steventon before going to Didcot. A bus from Wantage to Didcot at the moment takes approximately an hour while a car can cover the same 8 miles in 15-20 minutes.

Buses, by their very nature, must meander through villages and therefore take time, unless you are going to fund a separate bus service from each village to each transport interchange then it remains an imperfect form of transport. Most villages no longer have a bus service at all.

Also rural bus services tend to run only between 8am and 7pm. There is little opportunity to go from OX12 to Didcot or Faringdon for the evening as you may be able to get there after work but won't be able to get home later in the evening.

- 35) Direct commuter services exist to Oxford but could also be useful to/from Wantage. Many people currently travel to Reading and London from Didcot station and would use Grove station if it reopened, but if we want to encourage bus use it will also be necessary to provide a park and ride with access to these direct commuter services so that people from the villages can get access to the service.
- 36) The new station at Grove would also provide the opportunity to provide a rail/bus interchange with parking for cars, motorbikes and cycles if planned in advance.

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37) More than 40,000 journeys a year are made from OX12 to the hospitals in East Oxford and as this journey currently takes at least two hours each way on public transport (assuming those travelling to health facilities are healthy enough to use public transport and the waiting at bus stops that this entails), most people use private cars or taxi services. It is very important that the County works with the NHS to look at ways of making services more local (and providing bus services to them) and to make access to the hospitals easier on public transport.

### Improve opportunities for safer cycling

38) Although cycling is common in Oxford City safe cycling is more difficult to achieve on rural roads which link smaller communities. Adding additional cycleways to roads which don't even have footpaths is costly and not really feasible. We strongly support the work being done to improve connectivity and safe cycling and walking routes, by developing Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plans, but these must be practical and provide useful connectivity to town centres, health, education, leisure and community facilities.

39) We believe that the updated walking and cycling design standards should be made mandatory for all existing and future developments.

### Main day-to-day needs within a 15 minute walk?

40) The proposals suggest that communities could be built up again where all main day-to-day needs could be available within a 15-minute walk, thus reducing reliance on cars and building a better community? Could this be applied across Oxfordshire, even down to village level? We find it difficult to see how this could be achieved when many of our community facilities are being closed and new developments built in areas where no facilities exist. A 15 minute walk is less than a mile and even schools have catchment areas greater than a mile. A 15 minute city perhaps but not a 15 minute village.

### Personalised freight

41) Perhaps the answer to main day-to-day needs locally is personalised freight and the proposal of deliveries being digitally managed and integrated with network management with freight consolidation at the edge of built up areas with a transfer to a combination of bespoke autonomous vehicles and electric pedal low impact vehicles or drones for the last mile. There may be problems including issues of security, safety, noise and impacts on biodiversity with the use of drones so the plan should include a policy on drone deliveries to avoid, reduce and mitigate any negative impacts.

### Improving internet connectivity

42) Although 5G (and future generations of mobile transmission) can transmit at very high speeds, mobile coverage is dependent on fibre, and typically the faster the wireless speed, the smaller the coverage area becomes, so widespread fast wireless requires an extensive fibre footprint. As the most rural County in the South East, the implementation of such a broad footprint is likely to pose a significant challenge.

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Research by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) has shown that Full Fibre could provide a real boost to communities across the country and boost labour productivity by nearly £59 billion by 2025, yet the topic paper for Oxfordshire suggests that delivering full fibre broadband to all premises will cost c £35bn. This doesn't seem like a good economic return on investment and after the current crisis we are unsure how feasible this is likely to be.

We would be unable to support a strategy which depended heavily on full fibre broadband when this is unlikely to be available to many existing premises because of the cost of implementation.

- 43) We understand that Oxfordshire County Council is supportive of connecting the whole county, including rural areas, to a superfast fibre broadband. Being supportive is not the same as having a strategy in place to make it happen and we are worried that this is likely to be yet another area where more rural parts of the county remain "poor relations".