

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Oxfordshire Growth Board Scrutiny

Panel

OXFORDSHIRE

G R O W T H B O A R D

HELD ON THURSDAY 21 MARCH 2019 AT 6.30 PM
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Present:

Councillor Neil Prestidge	Cherwell District Council
Councillor Andrew Gant (Chair)	Oxford City Council
Councillor Craig Simmons	Oxford City Council
Councillor John Tanner	Oxford City Council
Councillor John Sanders	Oxfordshire County Council
Councillor Emily Smith	Oxfordshire County Council
Councillor David Turner	South Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Elaine Hornsby	South Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Ian White	South Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Sandy Lovatt	Vale of White Horse District Council
Councillor Derek Cotterill	West Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Julian Cooper	West Oxfordshire District Council

Officers contributing to and supporting Panel:

Andrew Down	Acting Deputy Chief Executive - Partnership and Planning South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils
Giles Hughes	Head of Planning and Strategic Housing, West Oxfordshire District Council
Amit Alva	Oxfordshire Growth Board – Project and Scrutiny Officer
Kevin Jacob	Oxfordshire Growth Board – Democratic Services Officer

30 Apologies for absence and substitutes; declarations of interest; Chair's announcements

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Ben Mabbett, Vale of the White Horse District Council
Councillor Nick Carter, Oxfordshire County Council
Councillor Sean Gaul, Cherwell District Council
Councillor Debby Hallett, Vale of the White Horse District Council
Councillor Chris Palmer, Vale of White Horse District Council, (substituted by Councillor Sandy Lovatt)

Councillor Sean Woodcock, Cherwell District Council

At this point it was noted that the meeting was not quorate as a member from Cherwell District Council was not present. It was agreed that the meeting would continue informally until quorate which occurred at 18:45.

There were no declarations of interest.

31 Minutes of the previous meeting

This item was taken after the public participation item when the meeting becoming quorate.

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2019 were approved as a correct record of the meeting.

32 Public Participation

The Panel heard two questions and one statement from members of the public.

Dr Eugenie Buchan representing Elsfield Residents Group, asked the following questions:

'Tonight, the Scrutiny Panel is looking at a proposal to commission a new review of the Oxford Green Belt. According to the text, you will carry out the assessment 'in a holistic manner alongside the development of a strategic framework for growth up to 2050: it will 'inform decision making and outline a Green Belt appropriate for the mid-21st Century'.

It is logical for the Growth Board to be pre-occupied with growth. And indeed, in this consultation, nearly all the topic papers including the Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report, stress the growth ambitions of Local Plan 2050, not least the goal of building, by the mid-2030s, a hundred thousand new homes with required infrastructure and motorways to support even more housing, if the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway goes ahead.

But the purpose of our planning system is not to promote growth *per se*, but to contribute to the achievement of sustainability which, traditionally is defined as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

For future generations the greatest challenge will be Climate Change and its rate of change is accelerating. On Tuesday the head of the Environment Agency, a seasoned diplomat who has been trained to measure his words, warned that the country could run out of water within 25 years and that England would reach the "jaws of death - the point at which, unless we take action to change things, we will not have enough water to supply our needs".

What would be the point of planning for a hundred thousand new houses in Oxfordshire if we do not have enough water and other natural resources to sustain them through to the end of the century?

So I have three inter-related questions about the purpose of Local Plan 2050 and the Green Belt Review:

- a) It seems to me that the primary purpose of your Green Belt review is to assess how much of it can be urbanised. But in light of climate change, do you agree/disagree that we need to rethink the function of green belts? For example, would your review and the Sustainability Appraisal score the five functions of the Green Belt in terms of capacity to protect biodiversity, a carbon neutral economy, air quality and water conservation?
- b) Do you agree/disagree that LP 2050 needs to prioritise Climate Change rather than 'growth' in order to deliver long term sustainability in Oxfordshire?
- c) Do you agree/disagree that to counter the threat of Climate Change, local authorities need to come together both to lobby central government and formulate specific measures to incentivise resource conservation, restoration of degraded ecosystems and rapid transition to a zero-carbon emission economy?

I trust that the Growth Board and the District Councils recognise the urgency of Climate Change and the central part that the Green Belt can and does play in mitigating it. In response to the current consultation, I count on you and your consultants to develop a strategic framework that puts at the top of the agenda the need to tackle Climate Change and to deliver Sustainability for the 21st century.'

Dr Peter Collins, representing the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, (CPRE) gave the following statement:

'This addresses CPRE's concerns over the processes and timetabling of the Panel's relationship to the Growth Board, the insufficiencies of the Board in dealing with request from the Panel and the paper on the Panel's Agenda to-day, entitled 'Oxfordshire Plan 2050 – Green Belt'.

1. CPRE continues to support the Panel's important task of holding the Growth Board to account at this crucial time when the Board's future activities and arrangements are under discussion and the Board is pushing on at such a rate that checking that its activities are in line with the democratic processes it should espouse is particularly difficult for District Councillors, let alone the general public, to follow. The timetabling of the Panel's meetings, only a few days before Growth Board meetings, must make it hard for considered papers to be prepared by the Panel for the Board's detailed discussion. CPRE advocates that the Panel review its timetable for meetings, to give itself more time to present considered documents to the Board which the Board would find it hard to avoid proper responses. A subcommittee could be appointed to deal with matters of unexpected urgency. The volume of business is so great at present that the Panel could consider more frequent meetings. Otherwise, discussion of topics will continue to be limited by the time constraint of two hours' meeting duration.
2. CPRE is disappointed at the Board's poor response to the Panel's proposal that it 'create a separate list of key consultees within the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (JSSP) consultation process, CPRE to be added to this list of key consultees. We all know that there is a 'wider consultation list including CPRE' – but we also know that this will not guarantee that the Board will consult crucial stakeholders in timely fashion in respect of all matters in which they are expert. CPRE and all matters of planning are inextricably linked. The Panel is asked to pursue the matter energetically with the Board.

3. Although all matters raised with the Panel at its last meeting were greeted enthusiastically by the Panel, for which CPRE is most grateful, it appears that the second matter we raised has not been pursued with the Board; namely, our recommendation that 'a clear priority be given for really affordable living accommodation, with suitable density and sustainability, over provision for employment on all brownfield land.' I remind the Panel that we accepted that 'current local plans can trump some of this, but it (our proposal) should be written in stone now from when the local plans come to an end, and the City and District Councils be asked to agree to seek to implement it as far as possible from now on'. This is surely something which a JSSP should address, and we ask the Panel to pursue it strongly in that light. It clearly relates importantly to comments in the next paragraph.
4. Concerning the Green Belt paper from the Growth Board, we would emphasize the importance of preventing urban sprawl, the essential characteristics of openness and permanence, and the five purposes listed as points a to e in the paper. The 1955 Act setting up Green Belts made it clear that 'within urban areas thus defined (being surrounded by a Green Belt), every effort should be made to prevent any further building for industrial and commercial purposes', thus creating 'a demand for development of additional land for housing'. There is full employment in Oxfordshire, yet the City's current Local Plan, despite saying that housing is its number one priority, is preventing conversion of redundant shops and offices to housing but allocating yet more land for unneeded employment which could be used for housing instead. The Growth Board's purposes stress growth in such a way, and without proper input from the public or even District Councillors, that presents great dangers of accelerating house-building, even including mixed development, in the Green Belt. I remind members of the Panel that a CPRE opinion survey using a large sample of Oxfordshire residents living in the City, towns and the countryside, showed that 75% believed that the Oxford Green Belt 'should remain open and undeveloped, and building on it not be allowed', whereas only 12% believed 'there could be justification for building on it'. Oxfordshire will, if growth continues to be a priority, require not only extra protection given to the Oxford Green Belt but further green belts created for other county towns. Green Belts give great environmental advantages for the health and well-being of residents but are essentially a planning tool to be ignored in Oxfordshire at its peril. We ask the Panel to persuade the Growth Board to use all these facts in their further consideration of Green Belts in Oxfordshire'.

Sue Haywood representing Need not Greed Oxfordshire asked the following question:

'Need not Greed Oxfordshire would like to ask the Scrutiny Panel whether it is satisfied that appropriate democratic processes are in place, and being applied, to guide development of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. I have five brief examples I would like to bring to your attention by way of illustration:

- The recent Joint Declaration of Ambition between HM Government and Local Partners (which, as far as we are aware, did not go through any local council committees) appears to commit Oxfordshire to being part of the "economic engine" for the UK, with Arc-wide growth targets and effectively pre-determining the Plan's consultation outcomes.
- The Growth Board agenda next week includes the election of a representative to the Oxford-Cambridge Arc Executive Committee, without any accompanying documentation or any explanation of the proposed governance structures or terms of

reference, and again, with no apparent discussion or mandate at appropriate local council committees.

- The Oxfordshire Plan document currently out for consultation differs from the draft signed off by local councils, yet at the time of that sign off, some councillors were not provided with an opportunity to introduce changes they had wanted to make. We should say that we are not necessarily opposed to all the changes made but it does raise serious questions about who made these changes and on what authority, and what judgement was applied to decide whether these constituted major or minor changes.
- The forthcoming Growth Board meeting agenda pack is minimal, and there seems to be an increasing reliance on verbal reports, and a failure to make sub-committee minutes available.
- At the last meeting, the Growth Board appeared to dismiss Scrutiny's request for more effective communication between Leaders and councillors, saying that they had '*already established clear communication with their other council members*', yet the Scrutiny Panel had clearly identified this as a continuing concern and our understanding from local councillors is that this remains the case.

Bearing these examples in mind, if the Scrutiny Panel now considers there to be serious flaws in Growth Board and Oxfordshire Plan 2050 processes, we would be grateful to know what you consider could be done to address this?'

In discussion about the issues raised the Panel commented:

1. The issues raised by the questioner were noted, and would be considered and captured as part of the Panel's response to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation.
2. Government policy on Green Belts was set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, (NPPF) but it was open to local planning authorities to take a view on how the framework was applied.
3. That objectives of growth and sustainability were not exclusive
4. That it recognised and understood the concerns raised by CPRE in respect of the timings of its meeting. Officers worked very hard to produce reports in the time available and it was felt that the arrangements were the best they could be in the circumstances.
5. That it noted that HM Government had published the Joint Declaration of Ambition with regard to growth in the Oxford to Cambridge Arc, and it shared the concern that the declaration did not appear to have been through any local council committees. The Panel also expressed reservations that there was a lack of background information in the Growth Board agenda to the appointment of a representative to Ox-Cam Arc Executive Committee.
6. That it noted the apparent differences between the issued Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation document and that signed off by local councils. The Panel, nevertheless, recognised that in relation to such a document it was customary to delegate the making of minor amendments to officers. This issue would, however, be explored as part of a later agenda item.

After a further detailed discussion, the Panel agreed that the Chair of the Growth Board should be invited to attend the next meeting to answer questions relating to:

- The amendment of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation document after signing off by the Councils

- The lack of substantive reports on the Growth Board Agenda including role and rationale for the appointment of a GB member to the Arc.

RESOLVED: That the Chair of the Growth Board be invited to attend the 30 May 2019 meeting of the Scrutiny Panel.

33 Oxfordshire Plan 2050 - update on project plan and Green Belt

Giles Hughes, Head of Planning and Strategic Housing – West Oxfordshire District Council, presented a paper which set out a programme to produce Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (JSSP) and work to develop an evidence base for the Regulation 18 Part 2 consultations. He also introduced a separate paper on the Green Belt and Oxfordshire Plan 2050. This followed a request from the Panel to receive further information on these issues at its previous meeting.

The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

- Ongoing discussions were taking place with Highways England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, (MHCLG) with the regard to the impact of a consultation on a potential OxCam Expressway and the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation. The discussions had been positive, and it was considered that the relationships between the two documents were understood better, although the discussions remained work in progress.
- The detailed workstreams which would support the Regulation 18 Part 2 document. Many of these would be new commissions from experts in their field.
- As part of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 process, it was an appropriate time for discussions to take place on the impact of the Plan on the Green Belt.

During discussions, significant concerns were expressed that the timing between the Regulation 18 Part 2 Oxfordshire Plan 2050 consultation and HM Government's consultation on the OxCam Expressway were not aligned. The potential routes for the Expressway would have a significant impact on the choice of housing sites, and this needed to be recognised by the Growth Board.

With regard to the agenda paper on the Green Belt, the main points raised in discussion were as follows:

- Commitment to the principle of the continued protection of the Green Belt.
- While helpful, the map of the Oxford Green Belt was not an up to date reflection of its current location, nor did it reflect the existing allocation of development sites. There was also the need to reflect and consider Green Belt locations across the county as a whole.
- Although the Panel recognised the status of the Green Belt, development had always been possible within its boundaries. Some members felt that the role of the Green Belt was not to prevent all development, but instead to constrain urban sprawl. The challenge is, therefore, to facilitate public transport corridors and encourage development where it could be most sustainable. The focus of the suggested questions within the paper was, therefore, incorrect.

- Issues such as natural capital, access to open space and the positive health impact of Green Belt were also topics that needed to be taken into consideration as part of any review. The Panel noted that Officers had to work with the published NPPF criteria around Green Belts, but there was scope to interpret it in different ways, for instance around environmental quality and climate change.
- Oxfordshire remained a largely agricultural county and this needed to be reflected in the continued protection of the Green Belt as a key principle. The continued maintenance of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, (AONB) alongside the Green Belt was also very important.
- Concerns were expressed by several members of the Panel around the sustainability of the existing 100,000 homes planned as part of the growth Deal. Further anxieties were also expressed regarding the potential impact of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc on sustainability and the Green Belt.
- There was a need to take a holistic view of the protection of the Green Belt and climate change by considering carbon sequestration, zero carbon strategies and reforestation as environmental infrastructure within the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Growth Board reflect on the inability of the Consultation on Issues (Scale of growth and broad locations - Reg 18 Part 2) to be effective as it precedes the HM Government's decision on the Oxford – Cambridge Expressway route.
- 2) That the Growth Board emphasise the continued protection of not only the Green Belt but also the AONB and Rural Oxfordshire by adding it to the principles of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Vision and by including it as a part of the Green Belt review: reinforcing the existing policies in the NPPF. In addition, the existing allocation of development sites within the Green Belt by local authorities is factored in to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Green Belt review.
- 3) That the Growth Board take a holistic view in mitigating climate change and preservation of the Green Belt by adding carbon sequestration, zero carbon strategies and reforestation as part of the environmental infrastructure to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

The Panel agreed:

That an updated map showing the Green Belt across the county, including sites already developed or allocated, be presented to the May meeting

34 Scrutiny Panel response to Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (JSSP) consultation

The Scrutiny Panel considered the agreement of an approved formal response to the Section 18 consultation for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (JSSP) consultation.

The Chairman thanked members of the Panel who had submitted individual responses to consultation questions as set out in the report. He commented that it was very important for the Panel's final consultation response to capture as many points as possible, and that

in considering specific responses to individual questions there were several general themes that he felt should be included:

- Climate change and environmental aspirations
- Housing numbers as part of the growth agenda – how to create a different evidence base; expectations around the need for growth in light of the Joint Declaration on the Oxford to Cambridge Arc; and the impression given by HM Government that the Arc was an economic growth area.
- A greater emphasis on prioritising opportunities for clean energy generation (e.g. wind farms), in addition to the promotion of energy efficiency.

A summary of the additional points made as part of the discussion of the consultation questions is set out below:

- Q7 – Natural and built environment context – concerns over the availability of water in the future to support levels of planned development, and the protection of water resources such as the possibility of a reservoir near Abingdon.
- Q7 – Natural and built environment context - the status of the Blenheim Estate as a World Heritage site needed to be reflected and given due prominence within the plan.
- Q10 – Transport and connectivity context – rail networks in Oxfordshire including the new Oxford Parkway to Marylebone link had been successful which called into question the need for an Oxford-Cambridge expressway. Not enough emphasis on train travel and too much emphasis on car travel
- Q11 – Broadband speeds were still very low in many parts of Oxfordshire
- Q17 – Aspirations 5 – Improve connectivity and movement – it was not felt that technologies would have advanced to such a point by 2050 that the rush hour commute would be a thing of the past.
- Concerns as to whether sufficient account had been taken of both existing population growth and the potential impact upon this of development.

RESOLVED: That given the requirement to submit the response by the end of Monday 25 March the Growth Board Scrutiny Officer should compile the final wording in consultation with the Panel Chair.

35 Affordable Housing Sub-Group - update on affordable housing performance 2018/2019

The Panel considered a report as set out in the Agenda providing an update on affordable housing delivery in 2017/2018 and an estimated performance for 2018/2019, by district and city council. It was noted that councils set annual targets for affordable housing delivery. These were expressed as numeric totals and included both the proportion of affordable housing on sites secured through planning policy, and sites delivered exclusively for affordable housing by either registered providers or local housing delivery companies.

Councillor Turner expressed disappointment that Oxford City Council had not achieved its affordable housing target for 2017/2018.

After further discussion it was also felt that it would be beneficial for the Panel to receive a report on projected targets.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted
- 2) That information on projected targets for years post 2018/2019 by district be included in future update reports.

36 Growth Board response to Scrutiny Panel recommendations - January 2019 meeting

The Panel noted the Growth Board's responses to the recommendations from the meeting on 24 January 2019 as set out in the Agenda. Councillor Gant updated the Panel on his attendance at the Growth Board on 29 January 2019.

With regard to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Part 1 consultation process and awareness events, officers were asked to provide an update with specific reference to any presentations made in schools. The Panel had previously expressed concerns around levels of engagement in the consultation process by young people.

Giles Hughes responded that he could not give an exact number of school specific presentations, but that overall it was felt that the consultation events to date, including the bus tours to towns within the county, had worked well. Lessons around optimal settings would be learned as some locations had enjoyed better attendance than others. The number of people making comments and registering to take part in the process at this early stage was encouraging. Further, in addition to the number of visits to physical events, it was interesting to note that traffic on the Growth Board website had increased – particularly around various publicised events. This indicated that people were finding out more and engaging in the work of the Growth Board and Growth Deal.

It was felt that it would be useful for the Panel to receive feedback arising from the events.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

37 Oxfordshire Growth Board papers 26 March 2019

The Panel discussed the Agenda and reports published for the Oxfordshire Growth Board meeting on 26 March.

Prior to the consideration of individual agenda items, the Panel commented that it shared the concerns expressed by the previous public speakers around the high number of verbal items on the Growth Board Agenda and wished to record its dissatisfaction. It noted that only two written reports were available to the Panel prior to its meeting, and that while a supplementary Growth Board agenda had been issued shortly before, this did not allow for enough prior consideration. In addition, the lack of a forward programme for the Growth Board and lack of advisory sub-group notes made it more difficult for the Panel to undertake its role in reviewing the work of the Board and holding it to account.

In their discussion about the issues raised by individual agenda items, the Panel commented that:

- Item 6: Appointment of Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Growth Board for 2019/2020. The Panel commented that it would have wished to have understood the rationale and process to be followed by the Growth Board in considering the appointment.
- Item 7: Appointment of a representative to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. The Panel commented that as no information had been supplied with the item it was not possible for it to gain an understanding of the role and the process and rationale for appointment. Given the likely importance of the role this was disappointing, and it was felt more information was needed.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Growth Board be requested to have a clear work programme. In addition, items on the Growth Board agenda should be concise and substantial and also be supported by reports/information on all items which are published along with the substantive agenda. This includes update notes from the three advisory Sub-Groups ensuring that the reports are produced well in advance of the Scrutiny Panel meeting and that the Growth Board minutes including any written responses to public questions.
- 2) That the Growth Board be requested to provide background information on Ox-Cam Arc Executive Committee and the role of the representative to the Committee including basis of appointment.
- 3) That the Growth Board be requested to revisit the recommendation on structured communication between the Growth Board and council’s members considering member reports of having received incorrect and incomplete information.

38 Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel - March 2019

The Panel discussed its work programme as set out in the Agenda and the following additional items were agreed.

- An up to date Oxfordshire Green Belt Map which includes already developed areas and existing allocation of sites for development.
- Report on Air Quality Action Plans being adopted by each local authority
- That information on projected affordable housing targets for years post 2018/2019 by district be included in future update reports.
- Health services and Green transport and safety (Cycle routes) vision in Oxon Plan 2050 as growth is delivered.
- Presentation or report from the Growth Deal infrastructure team.

39 Dates of meetings

The Panel noted the dates of meetings as:

Scrutiny Panel
30 May 6.30 pm
25 July 6.30 pm

All meetings are to be held in Oxford Town Hall.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

Chairman

Date