

Connecting Oxfordshire – Watlington Parish Council Response

Watlington Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the document 'Connecting Oxfordshire'. The Council felt that Watlington had a very raw deal in LTP 3 when the ambition of the Local Network Review of 2004 (that promised a strategic review of the road network around Watlington) was cancelled without a single element of consultation. The Council hopes that the new initiatives can be ambitious – especially given the time span involved. However we feel that the best outcomes for the County should reflect that it is part of southern Britain but not subservient to the march of the London Metropolis.

Being Oxfordshire

For much of the period since the war, Oxfordshire has sought to protect the character of its core city – Oxford - while establishing lively growth centres in nodes some 10-15 miles distant. This has seen the rise of Banbury, Bicester and Didcot, for example, as key growth points, and we appreciate that the 'Science Vale' concept is an evolution from this planning precept that has dominated for some 40 years. However we do not think that the confining of much investment into the immediate area of employment serves our county effectively. Employers in the Science Vale, desiring to attract able and well-educated staff from areas at greater distance will discover ever greater difficulties when journey to work times grow even beyond current norms. Only by a holistic uplift of traffic and transport planning across the whole County will a Science Vale concept be sustainable.

Too much in the Connecting Oxfordshire document is about the needs of London that has become voracious in its demands against not just the rest of South–East England but also much of the United Kingdom. This London-centric growth is dimming the chances of growth elsewhere. It is perfectly compatible to wish and expect sustainable growth in Oxfordshire without committing the County to supplying great numbers of homes and infrastructure to encourage people 'to go to London' on a daily or regular basis. In Watlington we have experienced much growth in 'London commuting' (by car, bus and train). We believe that it is a false dictum that we should expand to meet a need that is created not by the balanced development of the nation but through the suction power of London.

That said, it is striking that document creates so little of a Vision for the eastern part of South Oxfordshire, broadly a zone that would include the Henley area and the communities connected by the B4009 (Chinnor, Watlington, Benson and Goring). Here few new roads have appeared since the era of the Enclosure Acts and we are pressed to rely, since post-war rail closures, on frequently narrow, often dangerous roads that are sometimes little more than tarmac on a cart track. The lack of attention in LTPs 1, 2 and 3 has left this area open to the ravages of HGVs and mounting volumes of cars. This corner of the County has commuting and school runs of great distance on an inadequate system.

Safety

Watlington and its area have not been well served by LTP3, but we can look back to see moments when small investments from capital funding produced real advantages to our community – and Oxfordshire as a whole. Fifteen years ago the County introduced speed limits to villages, action plans for winding village roads and increased enforcement through Trading Standards of HGVs. Practically all of this is but a memory. Elements of 'action plans' – for example on the B4009 from

Chinnor to Goring have all but gone. Reductions in budgets in the County and the Thames Valley Police Force have left the capital investment of HGV zoning rather wasted as high sided vehicles occupying whole road widths ply their illegal routes on village roads. The consequence for many communities are noisier, more polluted and dangerous areas, often in the very heart of the residential community.

These older schemes involved an emphasis on road safety that is acknowledged in the Connecting Oxfordshire document, but is then largely overridden. In rural settlements especially, residents are facing the virtual absence of highway management and the loss of footways. All of this, it will be claimed, is done in the name of reducing demands on the revenue budget of OCC, but we fear that neglect is amounting to a position that is close to default.

- Even relatively minor road scheme such as amending a parking bay, take two years or more to come close to reaching the head of a programme of works queue;
- Parking and access arrangements are virtually unenforceable by the police or any other agency as white and yellow lines become increasingly rare;
- Zebra crossings are so poorly maintained and motorists question their existence at all;
- Evidence suggests that residents feel frightened to walk, cycle or drive. Cyclists, for example, suffer greatly as the edge of roads wear most rapidly;
- Footways strewn with unattended outpourings from potholes and silt from blocked drains make walking to local shops unattractive – possibly spurring on increased car usage to get to superstores to the detriment of local shops.

Nothing would aid connectivity more than to make the present networks pleasant and safe.

Management for Safety

If this is to be achieved with some mind to efficiency, we believe that existing contracts and management assumptions for capital and revenue scheme work should be examined through external review. Management styles need close examination – particularly in regard to

- a) working with ‘statutory undertakers’ and builders;
- b) communicating with key partners such as local and district councils; and
- c) the generation and use of Section 106 or CIL monies.

WPC believes that road safety has a poor place in the ‘pecking order’ of the all the objectives set in the scoping review, hence we stress these points for attention both in the immediate future and throughout the full life of the LTP.

Consultation

Watlington Parish Council is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the principles underlining LTP4. This represents a good start to community involvement in planning the future of Oxfordshire’s transport network. We do however hope this is not the end of it until a draft LTP4 is produced, at which stage it is too late for significant changes to be made. The Parish Council would welcome a real opportunity to discuss the particular issues that concern the community, and to be involved in each of the SPECIFIC schemes that would have direct relation to the town and parish. Too often in the past, documents – like LTP3 – emerge without any local endorsement or legitimacy. Schemes, not always lacking merit, founder through the scepticism and alienation from other agencies or disputation at the parochial level. We are not clear about the articulation of specific plans for LTP4 but we fear that all the past mistakes will be repeated.

South-east Oxfordshire

WPC feels that the area in which we live has become neglected. Such claims will no doubt be repeated elsewhere! Some of this we recognise is through the fact that too many officers and Members of OCC have little experience of the Chilterns area, save journeying through the 'Stokenchurch gap' or speeding by train to London. However we do stress that the experience and insight of those living in the communities needs binding to the process of detailed planning.

Separate communities in the south-east Oxfordshire 'zone' have much experience of working together on bus matters through the 'Five Parishes' group (Watlington, Cuxham, Chalgrove, Stadhampton and Garsington) and under the banner of WATNEXT – a group that brings around the table many residents from the area around the M40 to as far as Henley on traffic issues and especially HGV traffic.

There is respect for officers in the skill with which they generate essential data, articulate experience from elsewhere, and produce costings, but professional teams need to see the input of representatives at local level as essential, not optional.

For example, the requirements in Benson, Watlington and Chinnor for new housing areas make stronger the case for a co-ordinated examination of the B4009 'corridor'. Each of the villages on this route has unrelieved and excessive through-traffic flow in their central areas. Again there are many small village communities and hamlets– some of great historic importance – Shirburn, Aston Rowant, Britwell Salome, for example – that need and want to be involved in traffic review. Conducting an environmental assessment may be appropriate for a one-off windfall development, but it is inadequate for a corridor of development where hundreds of new homes are planned.

We should add that any good analysis of the B480/481 corridor (broadly from Stadhampton to Henley) will throw up a similar issue as does the B4009. This corridor is especially sensitive to a matter of great discussion over the years – any new traffic route over the River Thames.

Neighbourhood planning

We believe that OCC is understating the value to be gained from effective neighbourhood planning. In Watlington and many other places serious effort is going into uniting people in ways of seeing future growth and development. OCC appears to see these processes only as ways of allocating housing in much the same way as district councils did in the past.

Good 'Neighbourhood Planning' is sensitive to matters such as a school development, retail and business growth and, always, transport infrastructure. OCC appear to see the growth of housing in some towns and villages as piecemeal and incidental, requiring only meagre, low-level technical input. Real linkage between NPs and the LPT4 would see an opening out of possibilities for real and substantial investment in a coherent approach to connecting Oxfordshire.

Communities undertaking Neighbourhood Plans are already faced with nationally-driven demands for yet greater stocks of new homes. In South Oxfordshire some ideas mooted in the recent SODC Local Plan 2031 consultation place great emphasis on schemes in larger villages, especially in the east of the district. The LTP4 document, because it lacks a vision for South Oxfordshire away from the Didcot – Oxford axis, offers no transport planning of substance in the face of likely development pressure.

‘Connecting Oxfordshire’ understates the desire in communities to see Neighbourhood Plans reach full fruition and as touchstones for grander ambition that would make connectivity in the County efficient, safer and simply more pleasant.

Airborne Pollution

WPC believes that the OCC document understates concerns that are very active in several Oxfordshire locations concerning air quality. Watlington PC has attached a copy of its strong rejections of the work of SODC on air quality action planning generally and in Watlington specifically. We think the District Council has failed to act in a positive way to improve air quality including its failure to date to make it a REQUIREMENT that OCC does something on the local air quality question. We believe that SODC is ignoring the force of the original EU directive. WPC asks that you consider this matter far more deeply than is apparent in the overview document

HGVs

Increased economic growth will see pressures for a greater impact by HGVs. We firmly believe that more should be done to reduce the impact of large vehicles on small rural roads and the smaller communities. This ought to involve plans for the better storage of vehicles at night closer to the motorway network; and the denial of ambitions to increase the scale, reach and activity of smaller ill-positioned transport centres, many of which are based loosely on former farm settlements. These play little or no role in local economies but literally slow communication for others and produce unwarranted invasion into daily life.

Connecting Oxfordshire questions

Below we address each of the 15 questions in the consultative document. On several questions we refer to the analysis we have given in the section above and invite you to take on those matters too.

Q1: Do you feel we have correctly identified the most important transport challenges that need to be addressed?

- You have understated the value of safety in too many topics (see Safety page 1);
- You have no statement that appears to assist road transport in the south-east of the County, close to the Buckinghamshire border (see South-east Oxfordshire page 3);
- The document pays too little regard to the future of ALL junctions on the motorway system, not just junctions 9 and 10, and their future roles in connectivity (see South-east Oxfordshire page 3);
- The document understates the contribution that ought to be played by the presence of traffic pollution in establishing priorities (see Airborne Pollution page 4).

Q2: What do you think is the best way to reduce the need to travel?

- Obviously superfast broadband has an important role to play.
- You have understated the importance of reducing the school run for example. There is scope here for increasing the use of buses, community share schemes and walking / cycling routes to school.

- WPC believes that together with partners in large and small companies there may be ways of creating inducements – though the local tax system for example -to reward those not travelling great distances to work.

Q3: Please tell us your ideas for making the best use of the existing transport network?

Basically the existing local network of roads should be repaired and properly maintained. We state (see Safety page 1) that Oxfordshire is perhaps one of many authorities that is virtually in default of its statutory obligation. We make detailed recommendations to reform highway maintenance in Oxfordshire (see Management for Safety page 2).

Q4: How could travel around Oxfordshire be made easier for you?

WPC wishes to see at least the current level of rural bus network retained, but want help for providers – including successful community schemes – in creating new connections (for example Wallingford to Junction 6 of the M40). We should welcome stronger support for vital schemes such as Dial-a-Ride for disabled people.

Q5: What do you think are the best ways to meet the travel needs of people who do not have access to a car, for example, younger/ older and disabled people?

Probably the most important matter is to give renewed encouragement for the elderly to walk on pavements or even cycle on local roads in their community. This requires proper repair to walkways and a sensitive response to the addition of relief roads etc. in the County. The County has lost its ambition to make safe journey to school a key matter on its agenda – though many schools retain good practice here. We believe that the Rights of Way group within the County should be restored to its former strength so that a positive view can be taken of the contribution of the Definitive Path structure.

Q6: Where in Oxfordshire do you think future development would best be located to help reduce transport problems?

We fully understand the Science Vale growth strategy, but we believe that the document wrongly focuses on the precise loci of economic development as being vital to investment. This is false. The bulk of the impact of any growth strategy is felt in a widespread way. Watlington for example has experienced little industrial or office expansion in the past two decades – but a massive expansion of vehicles seeking access to the Oxford sub-region, and in particular to the Science vale area.

Q7: When trying to reduce journey times and improve journey time reliability what (if any) types of journey should be prioritised?

WPC generally supports the growth of travel that has least impact on the pollution index and the growth of carbon generating vehicles. We should like to see OCC re-establish a vital relationship with Sustrans and bodies that could create new routings. We should like to see Watlington linked to Junction 6 of the M40 by a safe and dedicated cycle route. If necessary, OCC should take more courage and use compulsory planning powers where they are warranted.

Q8: What do you think would make public transport more attractive to people who don't normally use it?

We expect that free transport for elderly residents is vital to the sustenance of many bus services which then provide a service for all generations. We should like to see more work on 'real time'

communication at stops and through technology. Some assumptions about bus routes are stuck in the past, but no imaginative grasp of possibilities is being taken within OCC. We regard the idea of Witney to Oxford linkage by light rail as important – but the principle could well be extended to the south and east of the city – to Abingdon or along the M40 for example.

To make public transport attractive to those travelling to work it is essential that the early morning and evening services are reliable and offer some choices to those travelling into the larger centres from rural communities. As long as this commuter service is limited and cannot be relied on to run to schedule most of time, it will never be accepted as a viable means of commuting.

Q9: The need for goods and materials to be transported will increase as the population grows – how should our transport strategy address the negative impacts of increased freight transport (lorries and vans) on people’s lives and the environment?

Encouragement in the use of rail is vital for goods – but so are proper depots and overnight stops for HGVs in better selected locales. The pressure of freight transport should be a major criterion when selecting areas for transport review (see HGVs page 4). In the case of the Watlington area we believe that an early review is now essential and should not be deferred until the end of LTP4 period. The conversion of former agricultural areas to become HGV centres in the name of ‘agribusiness’ should be stopped where this would result in excessive freight traffic through residential areas. Ways need to be found on a case-by-case basis to provide incentive to close down many poorly located centres.

Q10: What do you think are the best ways to reduce carbon emissions from transport in Oxfordshire?

The reduction of vehicle use – WPC supports much in the document that seeks this outcome. We are separately providing our considered report on the SODC draft AQAP to you as an annex to this report.

Q11: What are the best ways to encourage more people to walk?

Through making crossing roads less threatening (see Safety page 1). Key to this is ensuring restoration of pedestrian surfaces through timely repair and to give communities assurance that bad work by statutory undertakers is properly made good.

Q12: What are the best ways to encourage more people to cycle?

The thoughtful and necessary use of compulsory planning powers and land purchase should be considered. Good and safe routes are denied through superficial objections. Cycling in rural areas is too often confined to ancient bridle paths unsuited to inter village/town needs. Cycle routes from park and ride sites are very desirable if these facilities are to be extended (for example at M40 Junction 6)

Q13: Overall, do you agree with the draft high level goals and objectives for LTP4

We have several disagreements as explained in the earlier sections of this document. We again stress that, while mentioned, safety does not seem highlighted in exemplar schemes.

Q14: Is there anything which the goals and objectives do not adequately cover?

We think you have not attended to safety. The document understates the value of realised or planned neighbourhood planning schemes to transport planning.

Q15: Some of the money to install mass transit schemes such as trams may not be possible within the current funding mechanisms (government grants and developer funding). How do you think the money could be raised in other ways?

OCC has a poor record in finding co-operation with sources of funding at local level. It misses opportunities to raise levies through section 106 and does not do well in negotiations on local roads, including for example small schemes for roundabouts etc. It communicates very poorly and fails to lift a rural transport infrastructure that advanced too slowly to meet the needs of the last century – let alone this.