

GROWTH BOARD QUESTIONS AND WRITTEN RESPONSES

26 APRIL 2018

1. Question from Oxford Civic Society, read by Ian Green Chair of the Oxford Civic Society

We very strongly welcome the preparation of the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan and, as we have indicated several times at earlier OGB meetings we are ready to actively support the preparation of the JSSP.

We note the intention to shape the JSSP by early, proportionate and meaningful engagement with communities, local organisations, businesses, infrastructure providers and statutory consultees and we would welcome the opportunity to participate in the preparation of the Statement of Community Involvement. Will the OGB agree to a participatory approach to the preparation of the Statement of Community Involvement?

In a similar way, the Oxfordshire Futures Group of the Oxford Civic Society would like to submit to the OGB a report which is intended to be a contribution to the dynamic continuing formulation of the Statement of Common Ground. Will the OGB agree to receive and consider this contribution to the continuing formulation of the Statement of Common Ground?

He noted in his reading that 'early and meaningful' discussions were critical.

Response

The Board is willing to explore with the Civic Society and other stakeholders a participatory approach to finalising the Statement of Community Involvements for the Joint Strategic Spatial Plan (JSSP), and have asked the relevant officers from the JSSP Project Team to contact the Oxford Civic Society and other organisations that have an interest in planning and development to set up meetings to discuss how this can be taken forward. I hope that you will hear from our officers in the next few days.

In a verbal response, the Chair reminded all present that collective working was key to the success of the JSSP.

2. Address to the Board by Cllr Debby Hallett, Vale member for Botley & Sunningwell and Chairman of Scrutiny on agenda item 8: Statement of Common Ground - affordable housing or houses that people can afford.

I'm Cllr Debby Hallett, Chairman of the Vale Scrutiny committee, and co-chairman of the joint SODC and Vale Scrutiny Committee.

Today, we're creating an opportunity for the Oxfordshire Growth Board to collaborate across boundaries to help solve the most intractable problems we face: 1) our main highways are regularly operating over their capacity, and 2) houses here are too expensive for the people who work here to be able to afford them.

I recently asked for a report to come to Vale Scrutiny on the state of housing affordability locally. It came in Feb 2018; it's called 'Houses that People Can Afford'. Vale's report confirms what's previously been anecdotal evidence. Here are some main points:

1. The affordability level as defined by SHMA, is higher than as defined by Institute for Public Policy; SHMA uses gross income, IPP uses net income, so income is considered after tax. We need a consistent definition of 'affordability'. Basically, a useful heuristic might be this: housing is unaffordable if a household spends more than 35% of its net income on housing.
2. There was no data available for Vale or Oxfordshire housing specifically, so we used data from all of Western England, as the closest comparable area. Housing in Vale is more expensive though, so the affordability is likely even lower than what's quoted in the report.
3. We looked at house prices and rents in quartiles. In order to buy a lower quartile property costing £255,000 in Vale, an income of £57,000 is needed, which is an upper quartile income. So only the highest income levels can afford to buy the lowest priced properties.
4. Only 18% of ownership options are comfortably affordable at all, and then only to the highest incomes. (Ownership options are shared ownerships, first time buyers, help to buy, starter homes etc.) So four out of five ownership options are basically unaffordable to everyone.
5. Help to buy schemes make houses affordable only to top earners (over \$56,000).
6. Private rentals and any sort of ownership tenure are unaffordable to lower quartile income households. Only social rent is affordable to them, and we don't have enough social housing. (Social rents are approximately 50% of market rents.)

The whole report is available here:

<http://democratic.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/documents/s43516/Housing%20that%20is%20truly%20affordable%20FINAL.pdf>

Last month (March 2018) Parliament published a useful report:

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7747>

I urge the leaders of Oxfordshire's councils to do all you can under these new rules of working and within upcoming new planning policies to make some measurable headway into solving Oxfordshire's housing problem. Explore the options, be courageous and creative, and find sustainable solutions that improve people's lives here in the county.

Response

In a verbal response, the Chair said that the statement and the referenced reports would be considered when finalising the Statement of Common Ground and in the development of the JSSP.

3. Address to the Board by Need Not Greed Oxfordshire, given by Sue Haywood on agenda items 8 and 10

As Growth Board members will be aware, Need Not Greed Oxfordshire is broadly supportive of the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan process, which we hope will introduce a more strategic approach to assessing, avoiding and mitigating the environmental and social impacts of growth.

We believe public engagement and transparent and open decision-making is an essential pre-requisite to a successful process and outcome. It is also clear that decisions taken to benefit one area of the county could have significant impacts, either positive or negative, on the whole county including areas well away from the immediate vicinity of a project.

We therefore welcome the announcement of a Scrutiny Committee to help oversee the JSSP process. However, as accountability for decision-making moves further away from elected members, the responsibility, powers and make up of this committee are of particular importance. Equally important is an early decision on the make-up and terms of reference for the JSSP board and project team.

As we understand it, there will be a JSSP project team but no further details about make-up or terms of reference. Then there is the JSSP project board, also without details about make-up or terms of reference. There is the Joint Board Sub-committee, make-up unknown, which will meet in private to overview progress. And then there is the Scrutiny Committee, which will be public and have representation at least from each authority but there is no apparent provision for timeliness, meaningful input, transparency or power of veto.

How will the Growth Board guarantee that all these bodies will be effective, not self-selecting, properly accountable, and will include not just expert consultation but also proper representation for active input into the decision processes?

For example, what opportunity will there be for each authority to have a meaningful voice, given the restriction for their Council input going forwards to just three decision points? Will any one District have a power of veto over proposals?

What role might there be for other stakeholder bodies such as the Environment Agency or the Cotswold Conservation Board on any of these committees?
How will the Scrutiny Committee have a sufficiently timely and transparent view of the progress of the project that they can canvass opinion from the local authorities

they are representing and genuinely protect the interests of the communities to which they are accountable?

There are also still many unknowns that remain to be decided upon, such as the relationship of the JSSP and Local Plans, and the methods and timescales of public engagement. We would have welcomed the opportunity to have input to these.

The Growth Board has a valuable opportunity here to put specific wording on transparency and accountability into both the Terms of Reference and Statement of Common Ground, to protect the needs of each authority whilst ensuring sustainable outcomes for the whole county. We hope the Growth Board will now take that opportunity.'

With regards to the housing supply flexibilities package, we very much welcome the Growth Board's acknowledgement of the damage caused by speculative development in the county over recent years and support any attempt to minimise this risk going forward.

The news of a potential 3 Year Housing Supply for Oxfordshire is welcome as far as it goes, but we would seek clarity on what would happen at the end of this temporary situation. If there is a backlog of unfulfilled quotas, would we run the risk of being penalised more heavily further down the line?

Need not Greed Oxfordshire is asking that, **where local authorities are choosing to opt for growth over and above that identified by the new Government assessment of housing need, their housing supply test/housing delivery test should only rest on the lower figure.** We trust the Growth Board and/or constituent authorities will be responding to the Government's current consultation on the revised National Planning Policy Framework and ask you to support NNGO's position on this point.

Response

The Chair gave a verbal response outlining the main points where there were opportunities for the public to engage with the proposed committees and sub-committees in the terms of reference before the Board. The final decisions on the JSSP would be taken by each council, and he reassured the speaker that there would be opportunity for public involvement and consultation during the development of the JSSP. The points about the potential 3 year land supply were noted.