

Oxfordshire Plan 2050 – Vision Consultation March 2019

Oxfordshire Environment Board response

The Oxfordshire Environment Board is an alliance of professional organisations concerned with the promotion, restoration and enhancement of the natural environment of the county.

Our vision is an Oxfordshire where beautiful landscapes rich in nature are integral to a sustainable economy and healthy lifestyles.

OVERVIEW

The document rightly draws attention to the importance of the Oxfordshire environment, including recognising the vital contribution it makes to the health and well-being of local people and its role in supporting a successful economy.

Sadly, it is also right in acknowledging the decline in Oxfordshire's environmental assets alongside UK declines in environmental quality over many years, which has been well documented (see Wild Oxfordshire's [State of Oxfordshire's Nature Report 2017](#) and Natural Capital Committee Reports).

In line with the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, which makes a commitment to net environmental gain, we would expect this Plan to be seeking to halt and reverse this environmental decline to safeguard and support existing fundamental natural ecosystems on which our quality of life depends.

This would be a serious challenge in normal circumstances. To achieve it in the light of the significant growth proposals that the Plan assumes will take place will be impossible without a very clear and ambitious vision and objectives, backed up with significant infrastructure planning, investment and resources.

We therefore seek a far more ambitious Vision that is:

- a) **Much more transparent in its recognition of the scale of the environmental challenge ahead. This will require a thorough assessment of the impacts of the Plan on Oxfordshire's natural capital and ecosystem services.**

- b) **Ambitious and consistent in its approach to seeking net environmental gain at the scale appropriate to the services required to support populations.**

- c) **Able to set out a clear framework for establishing and supporting a green infrastructure strategy and action plan.**

Discussion Point 1 The Vision:

'natural environment is valued and conserved' – this phrase is welcome but should go further, recognising the serious decline in Oxfordshire's environmental assets and the Government's stated commitment to environmental net gain. We suggest also that Oxfordshire emphasises the ecosystems on which we depend and the phrase becomes **'natural environment is and natural ecosystems are valued, conserved and enhanced'**.

Natural & Built environment context (paras 12-17)

We welcome this section, and particularly Para 15 which references the *'strong link between the natural environment and the health and well-being of people in Oxfordshire'*.

We do believe it should include specific mention of the county's 36 Conservation Target Areas (currently only referenced in Topic Paper 6 – Securing Nature's Benefits), which are some of the most important areas for wildlife where targeted conservation action can secure the maximum biodiversity benefits. CTAs are part of Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery Networks.

Discussion Point 2

Aspiration 1 - Protect environmental quality

This aspiration is welcome but should go further, recognising the serious decline in Oxfordshire's environmental assets and the Government's stated commitment to environmental net gain. We suggest **'Protect & enhance** environmental quality'.

We strongly agree with the statement in Para 37: *'It is likely that the quality of the environment in Oxfordshire sets it apart from other "competitor" economies in the UK and further afield. This plays a large part in attracting investment and employees to help grow local businesses'*.

Aspiration 2 – Strong & healthy communities

There are clear links between quality of environment, including access to green space, and mental health & well-being. This should be clearly referenced within this section.

Discussion Point 3 – Draft objectives

Draft Objective 1

We suggest some changes to this wording:

*To maintain and enhance the **ecosystem services**, historic built and natural environment of the county through strategic investment and high quality design and to capitalise on **recognise** the benefits these assets contribute to quality of life and economic success, **as well as their intrinsic value, capacity and resilience for future generations.***

Draft Objective 2

We suggest some changes to this wording:

*To protect and enhance the County's distinctive landscape character, recreational, **ecosystem** and biodiversity value by considering the benefits these assets bring when **defining the scale of, and** selecting areas for, growth, by optimising densities, by improving connectivity between environmental assets and securing a net gain for biodiversity.*

Oxfordshire's protected sites are of vital importance, adding up to an area equivalent to Exmoor National Park and designated due to a collection of special qualities of national significance

However, the value of ecosystem services and the intrinsic value of nature and the environment goes beyond protected area boundaries and should still be integral to decision-making and should be explicit in the Vision.

Additional Objectives

We would suggest that three further objectives are introduced:

a) **An objective which reflects the need to engage communities with their local environment through access to green spaces.**

b) An objective which specifically recognises the need for action on climate change. This could be taken from the supporting Topic Paper 9:

'To lead nationally and internationally in reducing countywide emissions by 50% by 2030, on 2008 levels, and find ways to achieve a zero-carbon economy and society as soon as possible but no later than 2050.'

c) **An objective which seeks to protect and enhance our designated landscapes and to build the natural networks across the county to aid nature's recovery.**

Discussion Point 5 – Infrastructure

Given the earlier welcome recognition of the importance, and current decline, of Oxfordshire’s environmental assets, we are surprised not to see reference to green infrastructure in this section and urge that this oversight is addressed.

A robust and properly funded Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan is long overdue and is now an urgent requirement.

Response submitted by the Oxfordshire Environment Board

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