

## **HAVING OUR SAY by Hester Hand, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society. October 2021**

Many people living in this area appreciate its good aspects, but there is often frustration that 'they' aren't doing enough (or are doing nothing) to address serious problems. Who 'they' are is often unclear, because people are confused about who makes which decisions – not surprisingly, as Oxfordshire has three layers of council (parish, district, county).

Of all the things done by 'the council', planning generates the greatest unhappiness, or even anger. In our area, it is largely a District (Vale of White Horse) Council responsibility and they produce the 'Local Plan', which says what development should be allowed, where. Many people know this and the Plan is subject to detailed consultation; people can also contact their district councillor about planning matters.

In recent years, though, new layers have been added to the already complex planning process. We now have the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan, the Housing and Growth Deal, the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy, and more - but many people have no idea who generates these things, or how they can meaningfully influence them.

We, the public, are currently invited to respond to two public consultations affecting Oxfordshire. The 'Oxfordshire Plan' looks at strategic planning issues for the period up to 2050. It is being produced by a 'committee of representatives' from Oxfordshire's local authorities and it seems that future Local Plans will have to conform to this Oxfordshire Plan, which assumes very high levels of economic growth, and an alleged 'need' for up to 150,000 extra houses in the county over the next 30 years.

The other consultation is on the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc' – in essence, a proposal for a massive amount of housing development, stretching from Oxford to Cambridge. This exercise is led by the recently re-named 'Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'. Here, the assumption is that economic activity will double and require up to a million additional houses to be built in the Arc.

Neither consultation questions whether growth at this rate is appropriate for an area which is already heavily built up. Why is 'levelling up' not resulting in economic development going to places where it is needed much more, rather than to an area which is already heavily congested? What account, if any, is being taken of post-pandemic changes in patterns of work, living and travel?

These consultations are incredibly difficult to respond to - cynics might argue that this is a deliberate ploy to discourage people from participating. The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan runs to over 170 pages. The Oxford-Cambridge Arc plan, also very long, is full of 'motherhood and apple pie' good intentions, but fails to highlight the inevitable impacts of development on such a scale.

But we must try: if people feel that they can't meaningfully influence such major decisions, the system will lose its legitimacy. If those decisions are being made by nebulous 'committees of representatives' of various local councils or, even worse, by Whitehall civil servants, then we are looking at some serious democratic deficits.