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Science Vale Joint Projects Team
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Dear Science Vale Joint Projects Team

The Oxford Civic Society is pleased to make the following comments on the Science Vale Area Action Plan Issues and Scope Document, February 2015. We recently made comments on the South Oxfordshire District Council Consultation: Local Plan 2031: Refined Options and as we noted then, our comments are made on the basis that the city of Oxford and its neighbouring towns and villages are interdependent – the city and its neighbours have always functioned as a city-region and recently this has become even more evident. With the strong impetus given to economic development planning in Oxfordshire, led by the Local Economic Partnership in association with all Oxfordshire local governments, the city-region inter-connections are emphasised. Essentially we see the plans of the constituent Oxfordshire local governments being the interpretation of the agreed economic growth strategy to local levels and it is with this perspective that we make our comments.

Our principal interest is to see the Knowledge Spine of the Oxfordshire Economic Growth Strategy¹ implemented successfully, for the benefits it will bring nationally, regionally and locally – especially to the Cherwell District, Vale of White Horse District, South Oxfordshire District and the City of Oxford as well as to the Oxford universities.

We understand that the South Oxfordshire District Council's (SODC) Core Strategy and Draft Vale of White Horse (VoWH) Local Plan 2031 have proposed development sites for over 20,000 new homes to support over 20,000 new jobs close to the three centres for science and the main settlements of Didcot, Wantage and Grove within Science Vale and we congratulate both SODC and VoWH for their intention to produce a joint Science Vale Area Action Plan to support the implementation of a Science Vale Vision and delivery of the strategic sites in the local plans. We strongly support the encouragement of cooperation by the Localism Act 2011 which requires local authorities to work with neighbouring authorities and other prescribed bodies in preparing development plan documents and we very much agree that this kind of positive planning will help shape, coordinate and deliver sustainable growth across the area.

We also congratulate the District's preparation of this early consultation to seek to identify the key issues and scope of the Area Action Plan before more work is undertaken to develop specific planning policies. We have responded by bringing our Oxford perspective to the discussion of the plan boundary, proposed scope, vision and objectives and the associated identified issues.

Question 1 - Is the proposed Science Vale Area Action Plan boundary appropriate for the development of planning policies to support the economic growth in Science Vale?

¹Oxfordshire LEP Strategic Economic Plan, March 2014

The Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) focuses on three economic growth cores within a "Knowledge Spine": (i) Science Vale – where the existing extensive research infrastructure will be consolidated; (ii) Bicester – where improved infrastructure, high population growth in the short term and increased land availability will unlock the potential for significant increases in employment growth and low carbon development; and (iii) the City of Oxford – where investment will continue in the critical infrastructure necessary to realise the full potential of its world-class education, research and innovation that underpins the overall SEP.

One of the key requirements for successful implementation of the Knowledge Spine is linking these three economic growth cores of the Spine. In this respect we suggest that the proposed Science Vale Area Action Plan boundary is not entirely appropriate. We suggest that what is needed is an acknowledgement that excellent communications between the three economic growth cores is essential (especially transportation) and that extending the Science Vale AAP to become, effectively, a Knowledge Spine AAP (or a Central Oxfordshire AAP) would be useful. This would require extending the partnership to include Cherwell District Council and the City of Oxford and if this is too ambitious, can the provision of links between the economic growth cores be coordinated effectively in some other way?

We are very concerned that strategically important Knowledge Spine transportation investments are made in a coordinated way within and between the economic growth cores as this will significantly benefit the coordination of the delivery of Knowledge Spine growth.

Question 2. What do you think about the issues we have identified at this early stage? Are there any additional issues that we have not covered?

- Transportation within and between Knowledge Spine Economic Growth Cores

We have reviewed the issues and our key concern is ensuring that the interdependence of the three economic growth cores is recognized and that arrangements are made to facilitate their joint development planning and management with the emphasis on timely provision of appropriate transportation within and between them.

The SEP intention was that the Oxford Science Transit would be at the heart of the Oxfordshire growth agenda with a fully integrated public transport system that connects the economic growth cores / centres of innovation with the universities, complementing the investment in the road network to ensure that the Oxford City Region is interconnected, linking employment, housing, retail, cultural and leisure opportunities.

The SEP vision was of: (i) the core rail stations – Bicester, Oxford Parkway, Oxford, Culham and Didcot – receiving investment to become 'state of the art' multi-modal interchanges and gateways through which existing businesses and investors can pass quickly and efficiently; (ii) high quality, high frequency dedicated bus connections providing fast, direct connections from the core rail stations to university campuses, the centres of innovation and economic growth; (iii) Park and Ride sites around Oxford City becoming true interchanges, with additional connections to our university campuses, the centres of innovation and economic growth; (iv) improving connectivity to international gateways – in particular to Heathrow Airport – which remains a key determinant of investment decisions for businesses operating in the global market; and (v) working to make London Oxford Airport the 'city-region airport' - with ease of access to private business aviation services and with a network of interregional air services to other European centres of business

However in the recent Oxfordshire County Council consultation "Connecting Oxfordshire" the Science Transit role in the development of the Knowledge Spine is presented largely as a topic for R&D. The obvious use of the existing rail corridor between key sites at Bicester, Oxford, Culham, Didcot, Milton Park, Grove, and possible extensions is completely neglected. This deficiency is serious as it is understood from our OCS discussions with university representatives that the lack of good transport between R&D centres and university campuses is one of the most important current barriers that impedes collaboration on R&D and development of nascent businesses, as well as providing acceptable journey times between housing and such work centres.

- Strategic Gateways

The original LEP vision was one of delivering effective Strategic Gateways for Oxfordshire, these being in Bicester, Oxford and Science Vale. It was intended that as part of delivering growth in these areas high quality buildings and public realm with a strong sense of place needed to be created in some cases or enhanced in others. Place making projects that will address issues in these gateway areas were considered to be needed to provide exemplary gateways to Oxfordshire that ensure that there is a high quality sense of arrival into these key areas.

It was also considered that these key projects to improve these strategic gateways would be a catalyst for wider regeneration, providing a focus for further inward investment and positively impacting on land values. These projects would also help emphasise connection between rail and public transport interchanges and the town or city centres. They help to improve way-finding, deliver high quality architectural and urban design and dovetail with planned wider development.

- Integrated Transport Planning and Urban Planning and Design and Linked Capture of Increased Land Value

We would add that it is important that Science Transit is embedded in future growth, development and urban design of the areas it serves and indeed the system needs to be established before new sites are taken into service. Linked to this, if possible, attempts should be made to capture increases in site values as a result of their proximity to Science Transit and this increase should be greater the closer a site is to the Science Transit.

Question 3. Are some issues more important than others? What might influence their relative importance over time?

We suggest that this issue of transportation is very high priority, not least as the Oxfordshire County Council is currently updating the Oxfordshire transportation plan and as noted does not appear to be giving a high priority to Knowledge Spine transportation requirements.

Question 4. Will our vision and objectives for the Science Vale Area Action Plan help to achieve the economic growth set out in our local plans? If not, what is missing?

The County Council's proposed timing of Science Transit is also of concern: the planned slow delivery of the Science Transit over a period of 20 years is surprising in view of the current existence and operation of many, if not all, of the key sites to be connected and the need to provide key infrastructure in advance to reduce the likely adoption of the car as the default mode of travel by those who will be working or living at them. There is no mention of any Rapid Transit up to 2030, with the planned appearance of high quality interchanges only in 2026. Most of the projects to be implemented are concerned with improvements of existing services on existing roads, branding and ticketing, and do not seem very different to existing services.

As noted in the joint SODC / VoWH Consultation Document, the scale and pace of growth in Science Vale will require significant investment in local infrastructure, for example, roads, cycleways, water supply, and schools and it is also noted that this will be achieved through the councils working together and alongside the three centres for science (Culham Science Centre, Harwell Campus and Milton Park), key stakeholders, partners and local residents.

The County Council's lack of urgency could have a negative impact on the realisation of the Science Vale Vision and associated Objectives proposed in the Consultation document. In particular the AAP may not be able to provide: (i) the right environment for science-led business to flourish; and (ii) well connected and easily accessible places. Ensuring that the requirements of the Knowledge Spine, including Science Vale are prioritised by the County Council is essential and the vision and objectives could give more priority to communications / transportation.

We very much support the concept that development in Science Vale should: (i) contribute to a 'step change' in travel choices away from car travel towards public transport, cycling and walking; (ii) seek a package of rail measures that will expand Didcot's role as a major rail interchange and provide rail services direct from Grove and Wantage; (iii) enable people to travel quickly and reliably between towns, villages and their jobs by means other than the private car; (iv) facilitate targeted investment in necessary strategic road infrastructure; (v) better manage

increased transport demand from new jobs and homes; and (vi) support the provision of superfast broadband and improved data connectivity across all of Science Vale by 2031.

Question 5. Is the proposed scope of the plan, sufficient to adequately plan for and deliver the growth agenda for Science Vale?

The Science Vale economic growth core is a key component of the Knowledge Spine and it will only be successful if it is provided with the infrastructure necessary to attract and retain investment. Excellent transport connections to and from the city universities which are drivers of the economic growth strategy are essential and also essential are transport links between Science Vale and selected growth villages and the City of Oxford for access to the City's facilities which should be adding to the attractiveness of the City-region.

Overall, we think that it would be useful to plan for integrated and synchronized transport and urban planning in the Knowledge Spine as a whole and encourage consideration of explicitly acknowledging and planning for the interdependencies of the three economic growth cores of the Knowledge Spine.

Yours faithfully,

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