

Planning for the future

Gillian Coates, OCS Vice Chair



Oxford Central West, one of the most underdeveloped parts of the city, with great potential for coordinated planning (see pages 6-7)

On Tuesday 10 October, Oxford Civic Society was delighted to welcome David Butler, Head of Planning at Oxford City Council. David has been in post since January 2023, and the large audience that gathered in the Lecture Hall at Rewley House was keen to hear about the challenges he has faced in his initial 9 months of appointment and his Vision for the City. David has an interesting background: he studied Ancient History and Classical Archaeology at the University of Warwick, followed by a Master's in Spatial Planning at Oxford Brookes. Prior to his current role he worked for Coventry City Council as Head of Planning Policy, and held a variety of Planning and Economic Development roles within Warwick District Council. So, a wealth of experience to help him face the challenges that Oxford presents and the inordinate quagmire of process bureaucracy, political meddling and constant legislative changes.

Where are we now?

David thought that Oxford City was in a reasonable position, but added the caveats that since 2010 we have had 15 housing ministers and 7 major consultations in two years. He likened the demands on local government to the labour of Sisyphus: just when you think you're at the top, you find yourself back at the foot of the legislative hill and must begin again!

Planners, like estate agents, get a bad press, but there was some sympathy from the audience relating to the ever

changing face of planning legislation. Just considering the manifesto offerings from the political parties, local government officers and officials need to run to catch up. All this while funding from central government diminishes, the filling of vacancies for planners in the various agencies is suspended and existing staff are faced with a growing workload.



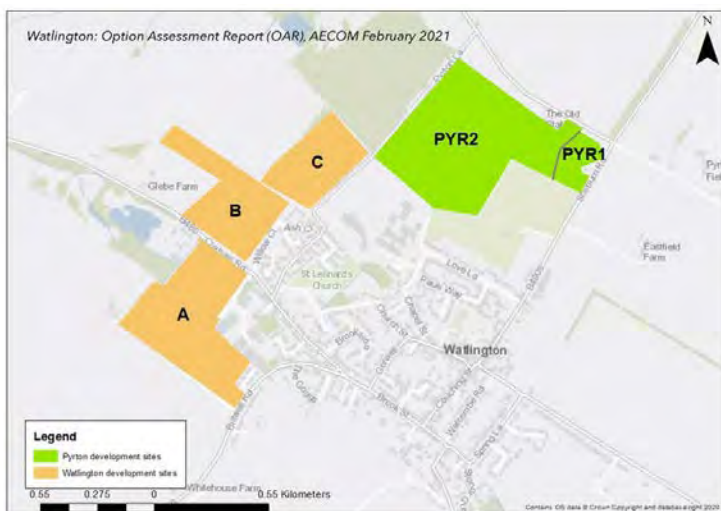
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Transport – The Watlington Relief Road

Graham Smith, urban designer, member of OCS Transport Group

This is an important case study, because it exemplifies the attitudes of Oxfordshire Highways authority countywide, especially where new development sites are concerned but also in all other interventions. In this case study we are looking at the proposal for development sites around Watlington, Oxfordshire.



Proposed development sites in Watlington and Pyrtou

The County introduction to the Watlington project states: "Its aim is to alleviate congestion, noise and air pollution in the town centre and enable future housing developments in the vicinity of Watlington by offering more sustainable modes of transport including public transport, cycling and walking."¹

This is indeed a sentence of two halves:

Yes: A new road to the north-west will be an alternative for many motor vehicle journeys and so could reduce the passage of vehicles and congestion in the old centre.

Yes: The road does give access to new housing sites.

No: The propensity to induce traffic otherwise deterred by congestion is not adequately considered.

No: The 'offer' of cycling provisions is naive. Located only on the south side of the new road and (in this version) with limited connectivity into the areas of housing or even across the road. As shown, the journey by bike is almost as constrained as the journey by car.

No: Walking permeability, whilst effusively indicated, fails even to reach nearby St Leonard's Church, let alone the centre of Watlington.

No: There is little prospect of additional public transport accessibility.

The cause of the limited permeability is the impenetrable nature of the cul-de-sac developments to the west of Watlington, a result of 1970s road layout guidance.² The claim then in 'DB32' was to make better places to live, with less traffic, by using culs-de-sac, and separating passing traffic onto a limited access Distributor Road. But the unforeseen consequence for the resulting pods of development, often residential 'single use', is an inevitable maximisation of car use by making other destinations more distant and therefore less desirable to reach by active travel modes.

Despite that national guidance being withdrawn in 2007,³ the belief in a disconnected layout, with separated Distributor Roads, continues unabated today. Oxfordshire Highways is one of those authorities holding this shibboleth.



The Watlington Relief Road is a Distributor Road designed for motor traffic. It is a 'withdrawn' type. As such, fears of inappropriate speeding have contributed to emphasising a 'wiggleness' that is quite alien. There may be no other road with quite such a profile of gratuitous curves. This is history in the making, as roads, once laid out, endure for centuries, inconveniencing travellers, wasting time and energy for centuries to come.

1. Why does the road wiggle so much?

- Is this the whim of the housebuilders or
- is it a positive intention to make speed control curves?
- It looks quite a nuisance to drive.

¹ <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/watlington-relief-road/widgets/61088/faqs#question16665>

² Residential Roads and Footpaths, layout considerations', Design Bulletin 32 (DB32), 1977, HMSO

³ (See page 5) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e0035ed915d74e6223743/pdfmanforstreets.pdf>

The Watlington Relief Road (cont)

- The roundabouts are described as being a 'compact roundabout junction' but they seem closer to a 'normal' roundabout design in many respects.
 - Why are there roundabouts?
 - As proposed, they are inconvenient for walking and cycling.
 - The crossings which exist on some arms look as if designed according to 'normal roundabout' principles, including wide flares, and not at all like an urban junction.
- The shared-use cycle path looks to be quite constraining, being on one side of the Distributor Road.
 - Will the design be made compliant with current guidance, LTN1/20?
 - Will there be straightover, raised crossovers at junctions?
 - Will Cuxham Road etc. be linked by provisions that are cycle paths rather than footpaths?
- The culs-de-sac arrangement seems entirely old-fashioned.
 - Why are they used?
 - The blocks of housing seem to be very small compared with older Watlington.
 - The housing layouts present no similarity to Watlington's older patterns of development.
- Boulevard potential:
 - The private driveway along almost all of the Distributor Road and on both sides, together with the

hammerheads, almost make a 'boulevard' arrangement with a main carriageway and slip roads at the sides.

- If such a design were purposefully implemented, it would make a more desirable provision for walking and cycling.
- There seems to be no pedestrian or cycling accessibility into Watlington (or to nearby St Leonard's church) even though there are many references implying it.

Conclusion

The design of both the Watlington Relief Road and associated housing is deeply flawed. The recent development of the South and Vale Joint Design Guide has had little impact on the proposals.

"The delivery of the Watlington Relief Road project will actively support the following key themes within Oxfordshire County Council's Corporate Plan 2020-24:

- (a) Providing services that enhance the quality of life and protect the local environment – The Watlington Relief Road project will promote the modal shift away from private cars and into the more sustainable modes of travel of public transport, cycling and walking. This will be for both existing traffic as well as supporting future development in the area, enabling a culture change from the outset driven by the provision of quality infrastructure, rather than attempting to 'retrofit' afterwards."*

The claims made by the Corporate Director Environment and Place to County Cabinet in September 2021 seem to me to be largely hubris.

SITES B AND C: INDICATIVE LAYOUT

