

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Campaign Manager's Report 2021



This is the report from the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group for the year ending February 2021.

As you probably know some 7,000 houses are in the pipeline for Wantage, Grove and the surrounding villages.

Many more may soon follow as the Council is thinking about the plan to 2050 and combining their plan with that for South Oxfordshire so given the larger areas of Areas of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) and Oxford Green Belt, there will be less places to put houses making Wantage and Grove a more attractive area.

Our simple green fields will be even more at risk.

Governments have argued that houses are too expensive and that by building millions of new homes, (more than we really need) the prices will come down.

We know from bitter experience that this isn't true. Developers will only build homes that they can sell and make enough profit to satisfy land owners and shareholders and pay nice fat bonuses to senior executives.

But developers are also the biggest contributors to political parties so have the ears of cabinet ministers so all planning law is written in their favour.

Government guidelines say that development should be "sustainable".

We do not think it is sustainable to put thousands of houses where medical facilities are increasingly inadequate, schools are at or above capacity, there is little employment, and roads to where there is employment are unsuited to commuting.

In 2011 we came together to campaign for a better deal for our area.

As it says in our Aims:

We are not against any development in Wantage and Grove but:

- **Developments should be proportionate and sustainable**
- **The infrastructure should enhance and improve the quality of life for its residents**

The last local plan approved by Government Inspectors covered the period from 2011 to 2031 and required about 23,000 homes to be built in the Vale of the White Horse.

Between a quarter and a third of those homes are planned for Wantage, Grove, the Hanneys, East Challow and East Hendred.

Planning permission for what are called "Major" developments (more than 10 homes on one site) usually comes in two stages,

- first **Outline Permission** - which approves the concept of building a certain number of homes, agrees the rough layout and the access to the site

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- secondly **Reserved Matters or Full planning Permission** – which determines the exact design including the size of each home, materials to be used, parking spaces, green spaces, trees, drainage, bus-stops etc.

Over 5,000 homes have already received outline permission and about 1,500 homes have already been built and occupied.

So what about infrastructure? – schools, roads, railway, health, leisure and water

We have one new primary school and a few additional classrooms in existing schools. The nearest new secondary school is in Didcot which has a similar number of new homes of its own.

We have one new mini-roundabout at the end of Springfield Road but no other road improvements yet. We are told that the Wantage Eastern Relief Road (from the Didcot side of Crab Hill, round the outside of the new development to the roundabout on Grove Road and Mably Way) will be built within the next two years.

There are no dates for the Grove Northern Relief Road (from the A338 near Williams to the top end of the Grove Airfield Development) or even any agreed plans for the entire route.

And the road from the Airplane Roundabout to the west of East Challow (which should take the traffic away from Denchworth Road, the Camel Roundabout and King Alfred West site) won't even be planned until the District Council agree to at least another 1,000 new homes in the area.

By the time it's built Wantage, Grove, East Challow and East Hanney will be effectively one conurbation.

There has been no improvement in parking in the centres of Wantage and Grove in many years and people park anywhere they like. The Police are still responsible for parking enforcement but don't see it as a priority so don't do it. You are less likely to be fined for parking on a double yellow line than you are for overstaying your allotted time in a car park.

This will change. The County Council has agreed to go to Parliament to get the law changed to civil parking enforcement in those parts of the County (including here) which still have police enforcement.

This may make our roads safer as double yellow lines may mean something again but where will all the cars park then? We're currently doing a daily parking survey of Wantage Town Centre and are finding that as we come out of lock down there is a shortage of about 30-40 legal spaces. We don't have a solution to this but it would be good if the Town, District and County Councils started to think about it now.

Grove Station is still a pipe dream.

The plans for the expansion of the Health Centre (first drawn up when the new Health Centre first opened in 2003) were confirmed by NHS England in 2012 at a planning appeal which I attended but still are not finalised. The Doctors believe that they may start building this year but we've heard that before and yet another re-organisation of the NHS may scupper those plans too.

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Wantage Community Hospital closed temporarily to inpatients in 2016 and is still closed, we have been fighting to get it reopened since then. I'll come back to that at the end of this report.

No improvements have been made to the leisure facilities except improvements to the tennis club (now in the Millenium Park on Manor Road), new childrens play equipment in the park and the additional of a new football pitch at Tugwell Field (without changing facilities or plumbing), although some new pitches etc should be available on Crab Hill and Grove Airfield eventually.

The promised new leisure centre has been cancelled and more than £6 million of developer contributions to leisure in this area has yet to be spent. We understand that the Vale is consulting with councils and sports clubs to see what it should be spent on so if you have views then get in touch.

Then water. Generally we have plenty of water in the pipes if not in the garden. Although the pressure could be improved but increasing the pressure will cause more leaks and Thames Water has about the worst record of any water company for repairing leaks. Sewage is slightly more of a problem. All new homes are generally connected to the main sewage system, but there have been instances close to here where this hasn't happened for several years after the homes were occupied and waste has had to be tankered away. Places like Lambourn have also had problems with raw sewage on the streets.

Luckily, so far, we haven't had these problems but unless work is done to improve the system, it could happen. We've seen the tankers coming through Wantage and Grove with great regularity ferrying clean water and waste between local sites, it will only get worse.

We are still at risk from the plans for a new reservoir between Marcham, Hanney, Drayton and Steventon to increase the fresh water storage for London. In theory this sounds like a nice amenity until you realise that they are not going to excavate the ground to make it ground level. It is planned to be built above ground and will be contained by walls between 15 and 25 metres high. That's about the height of an 8 storey block of flats and higher than anything else in the Vale.

It is also likely to be covered by floating solar panels so is unlikely to be useable as an amenity resource.

Although the housing and leisure plans are agreed by the District Council, roads, schools, social care, libraries etc. are decided at County level. So good co-operation is essential and doesn't always happen.

Health services are the responsibility of the NHS and NHS decision makers keep changing. At the moment it seems to be a combination of the Oxfordshire NHS Trusts and NHS England but that may change as BOB (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care System) seems to be taking over.

None of these organisations (the District Council, County Council or NHS) seem to be very happy spending money in OX12 so we have to be vocal about standing up for our small part of the County to ensure that they know we exist and need the infrastructure to make our lives sustainable.

This is where the Campaign Group comes in. We try to keep aware of any consultations, new strategies or plans which may affect OX12 from national level down and to participate to put forward our point of view.

We aim to keep you informed of anything that you can do to influence decision makers.

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Now: Health and Care needs.

Let's divide the issue into two parts

First the beds in Wantage Community Hospital.

Those in-patient beds used to provide a really good re-enablement service, giving patients back the confidence they need to cope at home after a stay in an acute hospital as well as providing end of life care close to home.

Back in 2016, the only legal reason for closing the beds was health and safety – due to the possibility of legionella bacterium in the pipework in the hospital at the time.

If the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group had a different agenda and just wanted to close the beds they should have held a formal consultation at the time.

Last year, the pipework was finally replaced and the risk of legionella disappeared. They made a big fuss about re-opening the Maternity beds after the work had been done, but made no mention of in-patients.

So why weren't these in-patient beds immediately re-opened?

Instead they still remain "temporarily" closed after almost 5 years.

Together with the Save Wantage Hospital Group, and the Hospital League of Friends, we've been fighting to get them re-opened ever since.

Eventually in 2018, the CCG agreed to use OX12 as a pilot and do a project looking at the Health and Care needs of our residents to work out what facilities we really need. We got involved and I chaired what was called a Stakeholder Reference Group, which was a group of about a dozen people representing the area including representatives of the Town Council, Grove Parish Council, the Advice Centre, the Patient Groups, the October Club, and our Campaign Group.

We helped to compile a list of all the sports and social clubs and groups in the area and a list of all the buildings which could be used for Health and Care purposes (including, of course, the now closed Day Centre in Sterlings). We helped publicise the survey which they wanted to do of residents in the area and got more responses than any other survey done by the County Council or Health Service in Oxfordshire.

Yet they ignored all of this and produced a report which didn't even come up with formal recommendations but suggested that the Hospital could be used as a Dialysis Hub. Even though this had never been discussed in any meetings. We asked for the report to be withdrawn but then events were overtaken by Covid.

At the Oxfordshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) a couple of weeks ago, the OX12 project was effectively declared a failure as a result of poor management and a lack of communication with us (the residents). The response from the CCG was to start another project to look at the Community Services Strategy for the whole of Oxfordshire. No decision will be made about services in the Hospital until after that project has been completed. So, the in-patient beds will remain "temporarily" closed for at least 17 more months and are very unlikely ever to re-open.

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There are still in-patient beds in many other Community Hospitals across Oxfordshire, so why not in Wantage?

There's a petition of over 10,000 signatures asking for the beds to be re-opened. We've held two successful rallies in Wantage Town Centre. There has to be something else we can do. The Town Council Health Sub-committee (of which we are part) is looking at options.

That's part one of Health and Care.

The other part is about what services should be here in OX12 (or at least closer to here than Headington).

One of the biggest bugbears that people have had with Health Services in the last few years has been the need to go to the Oxford Hospitals for nearly all specialist appointments and the difficulties in getting there.

There is no reason why all of those appointments have to be held in those hospitals and the consultants could either have video meetings with the patients or if the right type of room was available hold periodic clinics here at the Health Centre or any other building which had access to the NHS computer systems.

There is a lot of talk in the Health Service about services closer to home and we believe that the old Day Centre could make a really good place in the centre of town for those services to be based, but persuading the Health Service of this is difficult and getting the County Council to even talk about the building has been impossible so far. So this is another area where we are working hard.

So we have a small executive committee who work with me to gather information, speak to council officers, attend meetings and generally keep abreast of things which affect us here in OX12. If you have a little time, then please think about joining our committee, otherwise just keep reading our emails and responding to any of the consultations which we find which are relevant to you.

Thank you for your support, we couldn't do any of this without it.