

Democratic Deficit in Oxfordshire
“An extraordinary affront to local democracy”

A new paper by the POETS group of planning, environmental and transport experts warns that local people and politicians are increasingly being sidelined from decisions about Oxfordshire's future.

David Young, one of the authors of the paper, said: “There is a widely used maxim that if you want to boil a frog, you don't just drop it into boiling water, because it will jump straight out again. You put it into cold water and slowly bring the water to the boil. By the time the frog realises it's getting too hot, it's lost its energy to be able to jump out.

Democracy is being simmered right now in Oxfordshire.”

The comprehensively-researched paper is being sent this week to all Oxfordshire MPs, district and county councillors. The paper raises serious concerns about what is happening in the county. There have been some extraordinary examples over the last year, where decisions on Oxfordshire's life and environment are being taken by bodies which are unelected, unaccountable, and/or remote.

Perhaps the most notable example of these was Secretary of State Robert Jenrick's astonishing intervention in South Oxfordshire, when he forbade a newly elected Liberal/Green administration from taking part in its Local Plan process, ordering its officers to push through a Local Plan prepared by the previous Conservative majority. The Oxford Times described this as ‘an extraordinary affront to local democracy’.

However, POETS highlights many other ways in which Oxfordshire people are unable to determine their own future. These include failures by government and related organisations to engage meaningfully with local people, not least by the many outside bodies driving a level of growth well beyond what is needed in the county - and to the probable detriment of other regions. Though the government says the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway is ‘paused’, POETS recently exposed a possible link up of planned by-passes from the A34 south of Oxford to the M40 which could revive the infamous concept – an ‘Expressway by stealth’.

Another of the authors, Chris Cousins, explained;

“We produced a paper on the poor health of local democracy at the end of 2019. A year later the ‘democratic deficit’ has increased. We think that it is essential that local elections take place this year, after the government postponed them in 2020. The public have the opportunity to get involved and challenge candidates about how they would enable greater local control over Oxfordshire's future”.

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Because much of what happens here is set fairly arbitrarily by central government or its agencies, POETS has looked more deeply at their influence and performance. The Government's Planning White Paper caused a storm of controversy amongst all political parties, and a response is awaited. Meantime central government is pressing on with further deregulation of planning and building – at a time when the Inquiry into the wholly avoidable disaster at Grenfell is not completed.

David Young added, "Democracy has been threatened recently in many western democracies; the USA is not a distant planet. Our rights to local determination have been steadily eroded this century. And if this continues, we will find it much harder to combat climate change, health inequality, poverty and environmental degradation, and to care for a very special county. We need a new settlement of power and resources between central and local government."

Note for Editors.

The POETS paper can be found here www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-democratic-deficit-2021Update-paper-080221.pdf

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