

VISION FOR STROUD 2050 AND THE DRAFT LOCAL PLAN

This response to the consultation on the Local Plan follows up Professor ██████████'s detailed comments, and our shared concerns for the long-term wellbeing and sustainability of the District. It addresses five key challenges or failings in the Local Plan: filling the housing gaps; cutting congestion; protecting the countryside; revitalising town centres; and increasing skills and capacity. I put forward some practical suggestions for how the gaps could be filled in ways that would enable the District Council to meet its aspirations for dealing with the 'climate emergency' in ways that are within its grasp. In each case I have made general comments as well as specific proposals that should add value to the Local Plan.

As an economist and strategic planner, and founder of the consultancy URBED www.urbed.coop, I am particularly disturbed by the failure of the plan to grapple sufficiently with the key strategic issues facing the District, and therefore attracting the investment that is needed. As a resident for some 30 years, I also want to comment on missed opportunities to upgrade the quality of design, especially with regard to the setting of Stroud and some of the other town centres. My comments apply the findings of research undertaken for the Town and Country Planning Association policy paper *Sharing Land Value Uplift: a fairer system for funding and delivering housing growth*, which I am attaching. My comments make use of analysis of house prices and land values and charts in the paper <http://www.urbedtrust.com/sharing-the-uplift-in-land-values-tcpa> .

1. Filling the housing gaps

Like many areas in the South of England Stroud District faces acute housing pressures, reflected in house price inflation and visible signs of homelessness in Stroud town centre. However, Stroud is also at several important turning points. It is in an area of relatively low prices compared with its accessibility to London and will therefore continue to draw incomers. Regular hourly train services by new trains will attract additional residents as will the good long-distance bus services three times a day direct from Victoria to Stroud. There are many residents that place a high value on the quality of the green environment values and on tackling climate change. Yet new housing is largely being developed away from transport corridors while areas around the stations lie underused. Nowhere is this more obvious than around Stonehouse, where new housing to the West of the industrial estate will be entirely car-based.

Though there are some excellent examples of pioneering schemes such as Cohousing at Springhill or the urban village around Ebley Mill and the canal, suitable sites are not being brought forward, while treasured views are threatened. Also developers complain of difficulties of negotiating detailed consents, for example on the long empty site at Rooksmoor Mills on the Bath Road. If the increased demand is not to further escalate the difficulties for the young and those on lower incomes, large well-located 'strategic' sites need to be brought forward in both the District and the wider Travel To Work area. As an example there are major potential sites to the North of Stonehouse, largely owned by the County, or Staverton Airport, jointly owned by Gloucester and Cheltenham Councils, where large-scale quality housing could be combined with new stations. Opposition to development would be reduced if the Council committed to implementing Garden City principles; our submission that won the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize shows what is needed. <http://urbed.coop/projects/wolfson-economic-prize>

There are also many smaller opportunities that could be accelerated if the principles were adopted of requiring higher quality development, but with reduced parking standards in locations that are

highly connected or potentially could be. Land alongside the canal around Wallbridge Locks is an excellent example, which should include the spare road space. If this were combined by making better use of Council owned land to kick-start community based schemes, for example through Community Land Trusts developing awkwardly positioned car parks, or failing shopping areas, real progress would be made towards the Council's declared aims of being a leader in cutting carbon emissions.

So my first proposal is that Stroud District Council sets out sites in sustainable locations that could serve as Growth Zones, with development frameworks covering densities, proportion of open space, and a breakdown of tenures. These would be given preference over sites that are more than a mile away from town centres or railway stations. To accelerate development the Council should also issue design guidance for key sites, drawing on what the government has already published or the report from the Academy for Urbanism <https://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk/better-housing-for-the-21st-century-a-report-on-housing-by-the-aou/>

2. Cutting congestion

Closely related to new housing are plans for upgrading infrastructure. Congestion is one of the main complaints of both residents and employers and can only get worse if nothing radical is done. Nicholas Falk and transport planner Reg Harman put forward proposals for more frequent train services along the Cheltenham/Gloucester/Stroud line linked to a new junction to enable travellers to change readily to get to Bristol or elsewhere. This could be funded through development frameworks that secure contributions from developments that will benefit from improved services. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305218618_'Swift_Rail'-funding_local_rail_transit_through_smarter_growth

The SwiftRail concept has generated positive interest within the County Council and is expected to secure backing from the Department for Transport in the next round of rail franchises, provided Councils to promote the housing that would help recover the costs. There are opportunities for new stations, for example at Hunts Grove on the edge of Stroud near Black Bridge, where land has been allocated for a station in the County's Transport Plan, and this location was considered the best possibility in a consultant's report. Another possibility is Sharpness/Berkeley, where the station could be linked to a more comprehensive development at Sharpness Docks. In both cases development could help relieve congestion at the pinch point of the M4/M5/M32 junction. A more complex but equally important possibility is some new stations on the line between Stroud and Swindon now that it has been double-tracked at great cost. One possibility is a new station or halt to the West of Swindon and another would be at Brimscombe. A more frequent service, rather like the old RailMotor auto trains that run for fifty years in the early twentieth century should be viable again once efforts are made to curb car use.

A related scheme with potentially even greater benefits would involve rethinking the large-scale road plans for the notorious congestion spots off the A417, both at the junction with the road to Stroud and more important still at the Air Balloon roundabout. Currently a scheme costed at up to £1 billion has been considered to create a dual carriageway bypass. Yet significant improvements could be achieved at far lower cost simply by redesigning the roundabout to allow traffic to bypass queues. The savings could then be available to use for projects that improve walking and cycling. This area is a classic example of the need to adopt a more holistic approach that links up investment in development with transport and shifts attitudes and behaviour.

So the second proposal is to test out the potential for integrated transport securing a major modal shift, perhaps so that only a third of journeys were made by car, as is the case in Freiburg in Southern Germany. As a start experiments with car-free days should be run to see how feasible and popular they would be with people of all ages.

3. Protecting the countryside

To conserve valued views of the Cotswold hills it is of paramount importance to concentrate development along the valleys, a policy which should be supported by the County as a whole. This will only be possible if Councils stop relying on developers and private landowners to bring forward proposals, and instead provide an exciting but realistic long-term vision. This should involve designating Growth Zones as well as Regeneration Areas based on land values and hence housing demand. The Council would then need to commission development frameworks that will reconcile the interests of the main stakeholders. Such an approach in which existing residents saw some value from new development would reduce opposition to new housing, while at the same time generating more funding for environmental projects.

Such an approach, which is used in other North European countries, will be of even greater importance when the UK leaves the European Union. Not only is the English countryside and the Cotswolds one of our greatest national assets, but it is also where some of the most advanced businesses are to be found, such as Renishaw and the many firms in the aerospace industry. A positive image or vision for the future countryside, which could for example include a new country park of national importance along the River Severn, could help transfer some of the uplift in land values from further development into measures to improve access to the countryside and prevent flooding, for example through more tree coverage. The pioneering work of the Stroud Valleys Project in engaging the community in small scale environmental projects deserves to be taken up more widely.

So my third proposal is to launch a major environmental project, perhaps reducing energy use through land-based windmills, that will avert the threat of flooding through large scale tree planting and the removal of sheep from the uplands. Such a project would double the amount of land taken from housing in country parks that all can enjoy.

4. Revitalising town centres

Stroud District boasts a valuable network of market towns, which form an important part of the 'common wealth' that contributes to happiness and public health (for example by making it easier to walk or cycle to services, and to engage with other people. While the whole world is affected by the revolution in digital technology and its effects on retailing, strangely it is only the UK and many American towns that have suffered most from the reduction in spending and consequent vitality and viability. Stroud town has been particularly hit by out of town shopping as former industrial sites have been converted into retail warehouses and superstores, which offer free parking and hence easy access for those in cars. The noticeable gaps in the shop offer can only get worse unless there is a concerted effort to apply the proposals in the agreed Neighbourhood Plan and to redevelop sites on the edge for housing. All the towns now need to tap more spending power if they are to combat the drain from e-commerce.

By making it possible not just for the young on low incomes, but also prosperous older people to move into modern, low energy housing in walking distance of amenities and public transport, the trends can be reversed. Stroud, with its distinctive character and cultural offer, should be one of the leaders in showing how towns can adapt to and overcome trends that threaten to pull communities

apart. By taking up the proposals put forward in the TCPA paper on land value capture it would be possible to cut parking charges and potentially reduce VAT on refurbishment, policies that the new government could well support. The Council is already starting to build much needed housing, but its key role should be in helping to assemble site for mixed use schemes. It can draw on the experience gained with the renovation of the canal, and developments such as around Ebley Mill. Opportunities can then be taken up to reduce energy and water consumption in the new developments, as well as to maximise community building, for example by bring together the young and the old.

So my fourth proposal is to set up a 'Regeneration Fund', packaging funding from different sources, to pump-prime town centre investment projects. Mixed use schemes that would deter private developers could then be undertaken by trusts with local roots, such as the Stroud Preservation Trusts so that not only can valued places be conserved, but also new sources of life invested back into Stroud town centre, and other candidates.

Increasing skills and capacity.

The final element in adapting Stroud to meet future threats lies in turning the towns into learning centres, with a general commitment to raising skills. Instead of young people with qualifications drifting away to find better lives or more affordable homes, Stroud's recognised achievement in the arts and social enterprise should be harnessed to raise capacity generally. There is a critical mass of innovative people living and sometimes working in the District, and one of the roles of strategic planning should be to mobilise their talents, so that planning becomes seen once gain as a positive force for change, and not as a negative drag on sustainable growth.

So, my final proposal is that Stroud turns planning from what is a tedious and ineffectual process for most people into some kind of campaign that will heal some of the divides, and offer fresh hope to the young. Stroud has been a forerunner in innovation the past and is generally a great place to live. Growth and change are inevitable in such a location, and it is the responsibility of the Local Plan to ensure that visions are turned into reality.

Many people in Stroud town are involved with movements such as Transition Towns and Extinction Rebellion that have a national remit. By collaborating with other similar towns and sharing ideas and expertise, it should be possible to create the Green Industrial Revolution that the country so badly needs.

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