**Objections to OFAS from Professor Veronica Strang – Expert on Water Issues and River Management and Local Resident**

I wish to oppose the proposed flood alleviation scheme in its current form, both as a local resident, and as an expert with an international track record of research on water issues and river management.  My comments address three key areas:  the extremely negative local impacts of the scheme; the flawed nature of the scheme and its outdated engineering approach; and the wider problems of excessive growth and development that the proposed scheme supports.

While I think there is broad agreement locally about the need for improving flood management in Oxford, and certainly some scope for making better use of riparian meadows, wetland areas, etc. to mitigate flooding more effectively, there is, as far as I can see, no need for the extremely destructive flood channel that is being proposed. This provides very little gain in terms of the flood scheme, and it has major short and long-term costs. All of these costs contravene the local Planning Framework that the Council is theoretically bound to uphold, as well as the National Planning Policy Framework, which basically requires a ‘do least harm’ approach to all infrastructural developments. The proposed major flood channel presents some major problems:

·      In razing much of Hinksey Meadow and Kennington Pit, it will destroy an important wildlife area, with high levels of biodiversity, which will not be readily recovered for many years, if at all.

·      It will replace these well-established areas of biodiversity with a massively over-engineered environment, greatly diminishing its capacities to support wildlife, as well as its value as a recreational amenity. *(Contravenes Policy 15./conserving and enhancing the natural environment, protecting green belt land, achieving well-designed places).*

·      It will deprive West Oxford residents of this recreational area entirely for 3-5 years, with concomitant impacts on local health and well-being. *(Contravenes policy to ensure safe and healthy communities).*

·      It will entail years of intensive engineering work, noise, air pollution and disruption, which will have a severe impact on the residents of South Hinksey and related areas of West Oxford, much reducing the quality of their lives, and creating a variety of impacts detrimental to their health. This is particularly important in an area in which the Council has already failed, for many years, to address severe air pollution and traffic issues. *(Contravenes policy to ensure safe and healthy communities).*

·      It will produce, for a similar period, major traffic disruption in West Oxford, with the constant movement of large trucks and materials, in an area already struggling to manage excessive traffic flows. *(Contravenes policy to ensure safe and healthy communities).*

·      It will contribute to the over-development of West Oxford and to the unnecessary expansion of its urban areas. *(Contravenes policies to protect green belt land, achieve well-designed places, and ensure safe and healthy communities).*

·      It does not demonstrate value for money: it will cost a great deal of public money for very little (and possibly rather short term) gains and will not add effectively to flood alleviation. *(Contravenes Policy 6. and Policy 14./meeting the challenge of climate change and flooding)*

·      The cursory consultation period does not provide sufficient time and opportunity for busy local residents to engage with and respond to this complex issue which will affect their lives for many years to come. It should be extended, and greater efforts should be made to listen to the views of local people. (*contravenes policy commitment to high quality communications).*

The proposed flood alleviation scheme also appears to be part of a broader policy – which Oxford residents have not voted for at all – to impose an intensive growth plan upon the city at the cost of its green belt. Although Oxford has almost zero unemployment, this plan intends to create 25,000 new jobs, thus massively increasing the population of a city in which it is already a challenge to provide affordable housing for younger people. While promoting expensive housing and industrial development in green areas all around Oxford, the Council has simultaneously refused to support the use of brownfield sites to create more affordable housing, or to enable the repurposing the many commercial buildings that lie empty all around the city centre, which (with some sensible rebalancing to make this more viable than the currently favoured ‘new build’ approach) have much potential to address the housing, traffic and pollution issues that Oxford faces, and to meet National Policy objectives to ‘ensure the vitality of town centres’ and ‘conserve and enhance the historic environment’. The proposed flood scheme also needs to be reconsidered, not in isolation, but as part of a larger plan for the overdevelopment of much of West Oxford, which may provide commercial gains to influential local developers, but will have major negative impacts on the resident communities in this area, and on its material capacities to support a healthy, biodiverse environment.

My final point is concerned with river management. Many countries are now moving forward to  take a holistic approach to river catchment management, recognising that maintaining steady and manageable flows of water (and good water quality) can only be achieved by engaging systematically with the whole of the catchment area. This entails employing ‘soft engineering’ or ‘green engineering’ that works collaboratively with the riparian landscape all along the river to contain and release water more steadily. This generally means a more thoughtful approach to agricultural land use throughout the catchment area, enhancing upriver wetlands, meadows and woodlands, ensuring the adequate control of sewage and agricultural run-off, and refraining from expanding urban/concreted areas to the extent that the catchment’s diverse habitats cannot mitigate water flows sufficiently. Many parts of Britain seem to be lagging far behind in this progressive shift, and remain wedded to highly localised and disruptive ‘hard engineering’ schemes, such as the one being proposed here, that – ultimately – cannot possibly deal with an entire river in flood. This shortsighted approach, which suggests a focus on local commercial development rather than seeking socially and environmentally sensitive long-term water management, can only produce detrimental outcomes. The agencies responsible for these decisions need to do some serious catching up, both in understanding more enlightened ways to approach water management, and in questioning whether creating urban growth at all costs is really what we need.

I hope that these comments are helpful in encouraging a positive rethink of this planning proposal.

Professor Veronica Strang

Professor of Anthropology

Department of Anthropology, Durham University

Independent website: <https://www.veronicastrang.com/>

University of Oxford, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography

Academy of Social Sciences

<https://www.acss.org.uk/fellow/professor-veronica-strang/>