

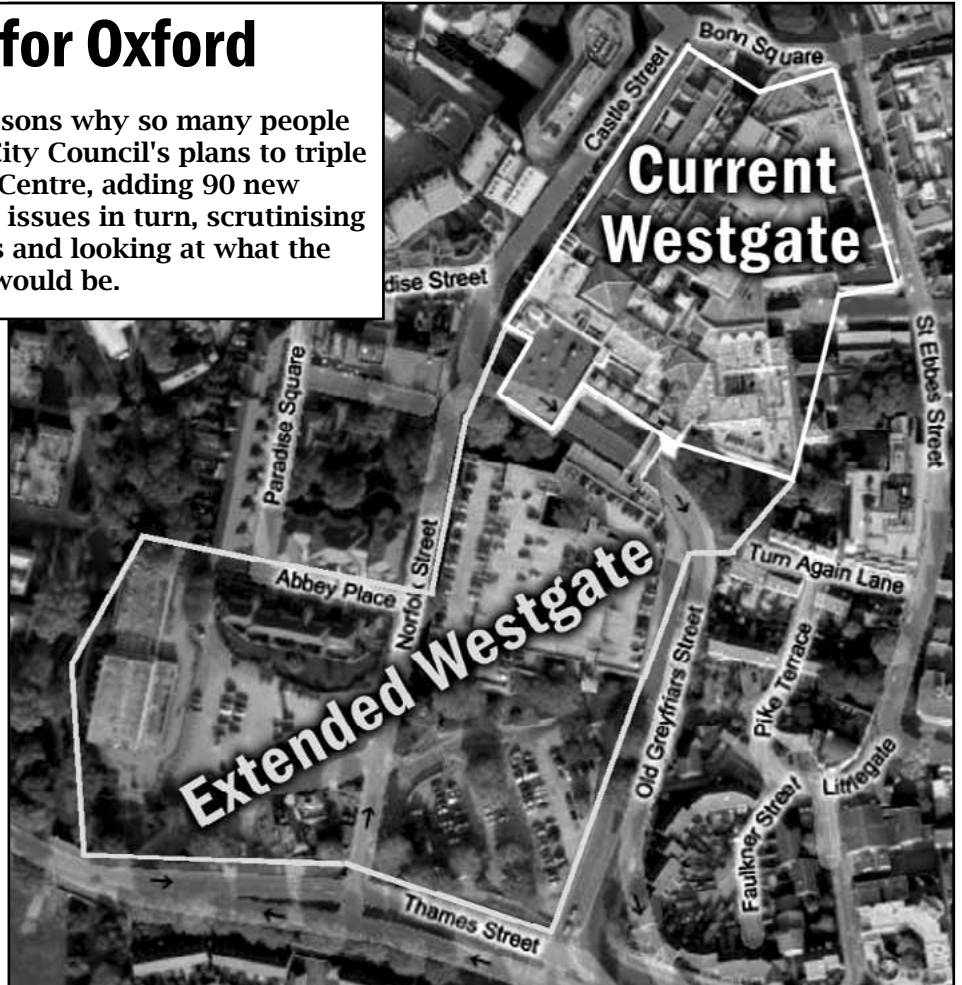
What's wrong with the Westgate Expansion?

Summary - wrong for Oxford

This briefing lays out the main reasons why so many people in Oxford are opposed to Oxford City Council's plans to triple the size of the Westgate Shopping Centre, adding 90 new shops. It examines each of the key issues in turn, scrutinising the claims made by the developers and looking at what the likely effects of the development would be.

The key problems with the development include:

- **Flooding Risk:** No assessment has been carried out into the likely impact on the surrounding area, despite the fact that the development would concrete over part of the flood plain, cut down dozens of mature trees and create an underground car park.
- **Transport:** The development would create thousands of extra car journeys into the city centre every week, adding greatly to congestion, pollution and climate change whilst providing only token support to public transport and cycling facilities.
- **Energy Use:** The development would be an inefficient, fossil-fuelled, climate change-inducing disaster, and would remain in our city wasting energy for decades, hampering our efforts to stave off climate catastrophe.
- **Abbey Place:** A whole street of sheltered housing has been scheduled for demolition. This proposal appeared late in the process, without proper consultation, and would result in people being evicted and rehoused without any say in the matter. This issue is now the subject of a public enquiry.
- **Loss of City Centre Trees:** Mature, pollution-absorbing London Plane trees are scheduled to be felled and replaced with concrete, saplings and exotic shrubs.
- **Lack of Affordable Housing:** By building so few affordable homes on a piece of prime Council-owned brownfield land, the development will increase the pressure to build on the green belt.



· **Local Economic Impact:** The entire plan is based on the flawed concept that Oxford needs to become one of the South East's major shopping hubs. The true impacts on the city's economy, in terms of the loss of shops elsewhere in Oxford and the siphoning of money out of local communities is not being taken into account.

· **Privatisation of Public Space:** This development would take publicly-owned land, which could (and should) be used to benefit the people of Oxford, and turn it into privatised shopping space for the benefit of large corporations and out-of-town shoppers.

· **Lack of Democracy:** This scheme has been hustled through the Council's planning process by senior Council staff with the bare minimum of consultation and publicity. Very few Oxford residents are aware of the scale and destructiveness of the plans, and many believe that they're just getting a spruced-up Westgate Centre and a new John Lewis.

For more information see: www.westgatewatch.wordpress.com or email: oxfordagainstwestgate@activist.com

This briefing was compiled by Danny Chivers, with contributions from Cllr Elise Benjamin, Cllr Sushila Dhall, Steve Gerrish, Miriam Hadcocks, and Jess Worth as well as members of Oxford Climate Action and VOCAL (Voice of Oxford Climate Action Lobby).

Background

In October 2006, Oxford City Council granted planning permission for a major expansion of the Westgate Shopping Centre₁. The work would be carried out by the Westgate Partnership, an organisation set up by Capital Shopping Centres and financial backers Coal Pensions to push for and oversee the development₂.

The developers claim that the expansion of the Westgate will benefit Oxford, and that the decision to grant permission for the scheme was arrived at through an open and democratic process. However, a small amount of research into the history and scale of the plans soon reveals a very different story. Rather than taking their proposals through a proper consultation, the developers put together an expansion plan with senior Council planning staff (with whom they had worked on an earlier, failed attempt to expand the Westgate); the planners then did all they could to push this plan through the planning process as rapidly as possible, with the minimum of consultation (see "Democratic Process", later in this briefing).

The planned scheme would, as this briefing explains, be a disaster for the people of Oxford, the local environment and the fight against climate change. A sensitive, eco-friendly redevelopment of the city centre taking account of the concerns of local people would be perfectly possible. Unfortunately it seems that this expansion has, from the beginning, been designed primarily to benefit Capital Shopping Centres, their financial backers, their corporate clients and the reputations (and egos) of a few senior Council planning staff.

The **Oxford Against Westgate Expansion campaign** represents the growing body of Oxford residents who are angry about the proposals. We are working to halt the expansion and push for a different kind of development that takes into account the real needs of residents and the local economy, using modern, low-carbon design and sustainable energy sources.

As part of the campaign, we contacted John Lewis - the proposed "flagship" store in the new development. As a company that trades on its ethical reputation₃, we hoped that they would join us in calling for a better kind of development in Oxford - if they wished to set up a store in the city, surely they would prefer that store to be part of a sensitive and eco-friendly scheme, rather than the destructive plan currently on the table? To our disappointment, John Lewis have not yet properly engaged with our concerns but have instead passed the buck to the developers₄. We hope that the information contained in this briefing will help to change their minds.

This briefing has been written to give anyone who's interested some background on the problems with the Westgate plan, and also as a response to emails from the Westgate Partnership and John Lewis attempting to defend the scheme. Quotes from the developers are from a "Q&A" they sent out in response to our campaign. Each section looks at a different problem, and examines the defence used by the developers. This is a work in progress, so please let us know if you notice any errors or omissions, or if you think there are problems with the Westgate that we haven't fully covered - contact us on oxfordagainstwestgate@activist.com. Please also let us know if you'd like to help out with the campaign - it's still not too late to stop the expansion but we need all the support we can get!

Note: While we are grateful for the support and involvement of several Green Party councillors, Oxford Against Westgate Expansion is an independent campaign, involves Oxford residents from a wide range of different backgrounds and is not affiliated to any political party.

Flooding

- increasing the risks without assessing the impact

The Developers Say:

"The risk of flood was assessed by the Environment Agency as part of the original planning application."

What They Aren't Telling You:

An assessment of the risk of flooding was carried out for the development area itself, but not for the surrounding areas! As the development would be located near Botley Rd, one of the neighbourhoods worst affected by the June 2007 floods, it seems extraordinary that this plan is going ahead without considering the wider effects of concreting over yet more of the floodplain, removing mature trees and digging a large underground car park. It's bizarre to assume that this will have no effect on the flood risk to the residents of nearby areas, but the developers are not planning to carry out any further assessment before beginning work on the site.

When combined with the major contribution that the development will make to exacerbating climate change (see "Energy Use", below), the scheme almost seems designed to increase the risk of flooding in one of the UK's most vulnerable areas.



Parts of south-west Oxford were flooded in July 2007

Transport: "Like just before Christmas, but all year round"

The Developers Say:

"The Westgate Partnership has commissioned a significant amount of background work to scope and address the potential transport implications on the pattern of movement around the City centre and Westgate Centre itself. Although the retail floorspace will increase substantially, the scheme proposes no increase in city centre car parking. The Westgate Partnership has investigated and documented travel patterns and movements associated with the scheme in close consultation with the City and County Council and key stakeholder groups including bus companies, cycle and disabled access groups. The scheme will include a dedicated bus route, increased city centre cycle parking and car club as well as a significant financial contribution towards sustainable transport aimed at promoting Oxford's Park & Ride facilities."

What They Aren't Telling You:

By demolishing the existing multi-story car park and then building a new one, the development would indeed lead to no increase in parking spaces. However, the parking spaces at Westgate are currently under-used; the Partnership are planning for an increase in traffic and so the new car parking spaces would be used at full capacity. The longer opening hours of the new Centre would increase this total still further. As part of their Environmental Statement⁵, the Westgate Partnership admit that car journeys to the Westgate car park would increase by 10% on Saturdays and weekdays. Using their estimate would give us 3,000 - 3,500 extra car journeys in and out of the centre every week⁶. This figure assumes that shoppers would park for an average of two and a half hours, filling up car parking spaces for longer than at present and so restraining the growth in traffic; if shoppers don't stay this long, then the increase in car travel would be higher. In an informal meeting with city councillors in September 2004⁷, the developers admitted that the traffic levels would be "like just before Christmas, but all year round". It's not hard to imagine the impact this would have on already-busy access streets like Botley Road, Abingdon Road, Iffley Road and Cowley Road - complete congestion could become the norm. The impact on air pollution and climate change would also be very significant.



However, this planned increase in traffic was not included in the "Masterplan" (the summary of the plans that was used for the public consultation in 2005/06 - see "Democratic Process", below). In other words, the public were not informed about the planned increase in traffic until the official consultation period was over.

The only extra bus service planned for the development is a link to the Park & Ride, which is expected to be almost filled by new customers for the Westgate Centre. While this is a better option than not including a bus service in the plans, it would still result in more people driving through the county to get the Park & Ride in the first place, and provide very little extra bus capacity for Oxford residents.

The cycle parking is planned to be a few dozen spaces, as compared to over 1,000 car parking spaces. Exactly how this is contributing to sustainable travel in Oxford is unclear.

Meanwhile, the long-term plan to pedestrianise Queen Street and find alternative routes for the buses that currently crawl through it each day would be made impossible by the new development. The pedestrianisation - which was included in early drafts of the plans - has been quietly shelved along the way, as it failed to fit within the later, expanded version of the scheme. The development would therefore leave us with clogged-up bus routes and a heavily polluted central shopping street for the foreseeable future. The air on Queen Street frequently exceeds legal levels of nitrogen dioxide (European directives states that this pollutant should not exceed 40 microgrammes per cubic metre; the average reading in 2006 in Queen Street was 101⁸), throwing the legality of the whole plan into question.

Energy Use - on track for climate catastrophe

The Developers Say:

"It was originally proposed in June 2006 at the time of submission of the planning application that 4% of the energy for the scheme would come from renewable source [sic]. Ongoing discussions with John Lewis as the main retail operator of the scheme and the City Council during this period resulted in the incorporation of a series of measures which by the time of consideration of the planning application in Autumn 2006 had the effect of increasing the use of on-site renewables from 4% to 12%. The measures incorporated into the scheme to achieve this include the introduction of biomass heating for 100% thermal demand for the residential properties (or alternative sustainable energy sources of equal or greater efficiency), which also extends to the John Lewis store. There is also further capacity built in to the design to encourage other retailers to take up renewable energy sources. This would then increase the percentage from 12% to 20%.

"The Westgate Partnership is committed to achieving an environmentally responsible development at Westgate and more widely throughout its Centres. It continues to review and is active in pursuing sustainability measures within its developments."

What They Aren't Telling You:

According to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC⁹), we need an 85% cut in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050¹⁰ in order to avoid the most dangerous effects of climate change.

As most greenhouse gases are emitted by industrialised countries, this equates to a 95 - 96% cut in the UK's emissions¹¹; we will need to make most of this cut by 2030, in order to avoid the impact of cumulative emissions¹² and to avoid hitting dangerous climate "tipping points"¹³. In other words, according to the latest climate science, in 2030 we need to be emitting 80-90% less greenhouse gas from our homes, transport, shops and industry than we do today. The new Westgate centre is meant to last until 2030 and beyond.

If we are serious about tackling climate change then we need to be completely rethinking the way we design and build these kinds of developments - low-carbon, resource-efficient design should be a fundamental part of the project from the very beginning. Instead, the Westgate Partnership are proposing an inefficient, energy-guzzling, mostly-fossil-fuelled development that would massively hamper Oxford's efforts to cut its carbon emissions for decades to come. This isn't just a missed opportunity - it's a disaster.

The new Westgate's energy plans fail to meet the Council's own minimum environmental standards. The Natural Resources Impact Analysis (NRIA) is an environmental scoring system for new developments introduced by the Council in 2006¹⁴. To pass, a development must score a minimum of two points in each category.

The Westgate expansion scored only one point for energy use in the shopping centre area. This meant that it failed the Council's minimum energy standards for new developments. Including a communal wood-burning ("biomass") boiler to heat the homes gave the residential section of the development a more respectable energy score of 3 - but the energy required by the homes represents just 4% of the energy needed by the development. The shops will be responsible for most of the other 96%.

Despite failing this basic environmental test, the planning committee (known as the Strategic Development Control Committee, or SDCC) were still able to give the plans the go-ahead thanks to a handy loophole - although the NRIA standards had been officially approved by the Council, they hadn't yet formally come into force.



Following further pressure from local residents and councillors, the plans were updated to include John Lewis in the biomass boiler scheme, raising the percentage of renewable energy to a still-unimpressive 12% but doing little to improve the overall energy efficiency of the building. Saying that there is "further capacity" for an increase in renewable energy generation is a huge cop-out and depends on the retailers being prepared to set up their shops to use sustainable power - why not build this in as standard from the start?

The impact of all the extra journeys into Oxford has already been mentioned under "Transport", above, and would be another major contributor to Oxford's greenhouse gas totals.

Despite the Westgate Partnership's fine words on sustainable design, a more detailed reading of the plans soon reveals that environmental considerations were very much an afterthought. The plans on the table are for a standard shopping centre with a few minor improvements tacked on afterwards in response to protests from residents and councillors.

The following list of "sustainability measures" is the best that the developers can come up with to defend the eco-credentials of the building:

1. The development's city centre location
2. Recycling of brownfield land and reuse of an existing building
3. Creation of an enhanced retail and residential offer for the City, assisting securing long term sustainability of Oxford as a sub-regional centre
4. Use of passive design features that will reduce the demand of natural resources, such as natural ventilation, rainwater harvesting and water conservation
5. Creation of green spaces and attractive, durable public realm
6. Enhancement of sustainable transport modes maximizing opportunities for public transport travel, walking and cycling"

Numbers 1 and 2 would be true of any redevelopment on the Westgate site, and the vague claims of number 6 have already been dissected in the "Transport" section. Number 3 is an extraordinary statement that reveals how little the Westgate Partnership understand about sustainability issues - they seem to be suggesting that turning Oxford into a shopping hub is just as important as (or more important than) maintaining a stable climate, keeping Oxford above water and preventing millions of climate change-related deaths across the globe.

Number 5 is patently untrue, and dealt with under "Privatisation of Public Land", below.

This just leaves Number 4, which refers to a few small-scale environmental improvements, most of which (such as the rainwater harvesting and passive heating) would benefit only the small offices of the Westgate Partnership, not the retail units which would make up the vast bulk of the site. These units would use energy and resources in the same inefficient way as most "modern" shops, and would be lit and heated using fossil fuels unless the retailers themselves specifically go out of their way to install renewable apparatus. The Partnership also say they would employ a "Sustainable Energy Manager", whose job would presumably be fairly limited given the lack of sustainable energy on the site.

The final environmental defence used by the Partnership is that the Westgate development could include infrastructure that would help a Combined Heat and Power (CHP) scheme to get off the ground, supplying low-carbon energy to the whole area. This was presented at the SDCC meeting as a kind of last-minute "trump card" in favour of the expansion plans, but in reality is largely irrelevant as ANY development on the Westgate site could include such infrastructure - we could put a completely different plan in place and still include CHP technology if we wanted to. It's also worth pointing out that CHP is not the same thing as renewable energy - it is a way of burning fossil fuels more efficiently.

In a world facing the risk of catastrophic climate change, these "sustainability" claims are simply pitiful and little more than fig-leaves. The redevelopment of Oxford's "West End" should be seen as a fantastic opportunity to put into place the kind of zero-carbon, people-friendly buildings and spaces that would showcase Oxford as a true leader in the fight against climate change. Just imagine - we could be talking about a mixed-use development of low-carbon homes with a few sensibly-sized and renewably-powered shop units, incorporating a new public transport hub, cycling facilities and public gardens, designed in collaboration with the local community. Instead, we're being presented with a bog-standard, backward-looking 20th century concrete shopping centre with a few homes tacked on and a bit of green window-dressing. It's not just wasteful and destructive - it's embarrassing.

Abbey Place - demolishing sheltered housing without consultation

The Developers Say:

Not much - they don't like to talk about the fact that their plans depend on demolishing a whole street of sheltered housing. The closest they get is to say that some of the housing in the new development will be "allocated to those with particular needs"

What They Aren't Telling You:

The original plans for the Westgate redevelopment (back in the 1990s and early 2000s) did not affect Abbey Place, a nearby street of sheltered housing specially adapted for elderly and disabled residents. The suggestion that the street might be demolished to make space for a bus turning circle was first openly mentioned by city planning officers at an informal Council briefing in September 2004¹⁵.

Far from being a democratic decision, senior planner Michael Crofton-Briggs simply stated that the houses were going to come down, and that it had become a non-negotiable part of the plan. This decision - to evict a street of people and destroy their homes - had not been formally discussed by the City Council at any stage, and neither local councillors, Abbey Place residents nor the general public had been given any say in the matter.

The following week, Council staff started knocking on the doors of Abbey Place and asking the residents to sign forms which would allow the Council to remove them from their homes and re-house them elsewhere. Concerned residents spoke to their local councillor (Sushila Dhall), who put in an official complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Council planning staff then claimed that they were simply informing residents about what might happen, and finally admitted that an official Council decision would be required before the demolition could go ahead.

When the public consultation and Masterplan (the summary of the plans that was used for the consultation - see "Democratic Process", below) were released, they contained a few passing references to the "redevelopment" of Abbey Place, but at no point stated that the street would need to be demolished. The consultees were not informed that a street of sheltered housing would be lost as part of the Westgate expansion.



The threatened sheltered homes on Abbey Place

The planners and developers did not refer explicitly to the demolition of Abbey Place until the planning application was produced, after the official consultation was closed. The democratic process had been largely bypassed, and the destruction of the street had been sneaked through by the developers in an underhand manner. This prompted protests and objections from Abbey Place residents, but this was not enough to prevent the Strategic Development Control Committee (the Council body responsible for planning decisions) from approving the plans.

Angered by this sleight of hand, residents and local councillors sought legal advice and initiated a public enquiry in December 2007 into the legality of the demolition. This now rests with the Secretary of State for Planning, and the result is expected at any time. If the Secretary of State refuses to allow a Compulsory Purchase Order (a legal document required by the developers before Abbey Place can be destroyed), then the entire Westgate plan will have to be taken back to the drawing board - but this hasn't stopped the developers from going ahead with tree clearances in any case. In the meantime, the residents of this threatened street have no idea if they will be allowed to stay in their homes or be summarily evicted and rehoused elsewhere.



Mature trees felled beside the Westgate carpark in February 2007

Felling City Centre Trees - unnecessary and environmentally damaging

The Developers Say:

"For a project of the size and complexity of the Westgate development, it is clear that significant pre-commencement works are required. As part of these works, certain trees needed to be felled in continuation of the archaeological investigation that was commenced before Christmas on the surface level car parks at Abbey Place and Westgate. The Westgate development has received full planning permission. Therefore there is no planning basis to resist the felling. None of these trees are subject to a preservation order.

"The City Council, as landowner, has entered into a Development Agreement with the developer...One of [the] pre-conditions relates to the need to carry out archaeological investigations at the site. The felling of these trees forms part of that work.

"The Westgate proposals provide for a net increase of 8 trees. These additional trees are likely to be semi-matured and will be planted to provide accents at key points along the streets and squares. The species selected will have proven ability to withstand the urban environment and provide seasonal interest throughout the year."

What They Aren't Telling You:

Eight mature trees have already been felled at the time of writing (20th February 2008), and about 35 more are scheduled for removal. Although the loss of mature trees (some of the trees are around 100 years old) from a city centre is always a minor tragedy, this felling is particularly outrageous for several reasons:

- The developers have not yet obtained a Compulsory Purchase Order for Abbey Place (see above). This is separate to the planning permission mentioned by the developers in their statement, and means that the plans do not have the final, legal approval to go ahead - yet the removal of trees has already begun.
- The majority of the trees in question are London Planes, which play a vital role in reducing inner city air pollution, absorbing and processing it without harm to the tree thanks to its falling bark.

- A new government report¹⁶ published on 18th February 2008 is urging local Councils to take urban trees far more seriously, as they are a vital part of the local landscape and make a major contribution to the quality of city life. According to the Guardian newspaper¹⁷, the report states that "just 11% of trees in towns are between 50 and 100 years old and just 2% are more than 100 years old", and Communities Minister Iain Wright was quoted as saying "Trees are a key feature of the British landscape across our towns and cities," and that Councils should act "to safeguard trees and ensure that character is preserved for future generations". Oxford City Council's actions have so far run entirely counter to this advice, but it's not too late for them to pay attention.
- The developers claim that a larger number of trees are to be planted than felled. However, they are unlikely to be London Plane, but rather (as is planned for Bonn Square), different species which will not provide the same anti-pollution benefits. The younger replacement trees are unlikely to sustain the same amount of wildlife, resulting in loss of habitat and further impoverishment of the city centre ecology, at a time when many species of native British birds in particular are threatened with extinction through habitat loss. Even if more trees are planted than are felled, it will be many years - maybe even longer than the life of the new Westgate - before they achieve the stature, beauty and environmental benefits of the trees that will have been lost.

Felling mature trees for a new shopping centre betrays a sorry lack of imagination and a backward-looking attitude. For example, the John Lewis store built recently in Cambridge was carefully designed around existing trees, according to Nat Wakely, Director of Selling Operations at the company¹⁸.



The present Westgate seen from above, from the south

Lack of Affordable Housing - more pressure to build on the green belt

The Developers Say:

"The proposals for the Westgate development include 127 residential units of which 50% will be affordable housing."

What They Aren't Telling You:

Half of 127 is 64 (rounding up). The demolition of Abbey Place means the loss of 12 affordable homes, leaving an overall increase of 52.

The new Westgate will remove 57,000 square metres of prime, Council-owned city centre land, and build only 52 new affordable homes. This is an incredible waste. As the need for affordable housing grows in Oxford, so too will the pressure to build on the green belt. If we cram the city centre with shops instead of homes, the pressure to create new suburbs - with all of the destruction of green space and extra commuting that will entail - could become unstoppable. A truly sustainable city centre development would include a sensible minimum of shops, complemented by affordable (eco-friendly) homes and public green spaces.

Local Economy - chasing the wrong targets

The Developers Say:

"[The Westgate expansion will provide] an enhanced retail and residential offer for the City, assisting securing long term sustainability of Oxford as a sub-regional centre."

The following text is from John Lewis¹⁹:

"Retail capacity assessments have indicated that Oxford is significantly undershopped with many shoppers choosing to shop elsewhere. We believe that the improved choice provided by the Westgate centre will reduce the need for those living in the catchment to travel further afield and that the number of people preferring to shop locally will increase. A substantial number of full time and part time jobs will also be created, both during the construction phase and upon opening of the scheme: these jobs will be wide ranging and, with the help of Shop for Jobs and other government agencies will reach out to all parts of the local community.

What They Aren't Telling You:

The claims that Oxford is "undershopped" come from a 2003 study by Roger Tym & Partners²⁰, comparing Oxford's status as a shopping destination with other English cities. They concluded that not enough people were coming to Oxford for shopping - they were coming for strange things like the history, the culture and the architecture instead. The obvious solution was therefore to build more shops.

This argument - that Oxford needs to compete with other cities (or "sub-regional centres") in attracting shoppers - is a major reason given by Council planning staff for expanding the Westgate. Not because Oxford residents need more shops, but because Oxford should, for some reason, be attracting shoppers from Reading, Birmingham and Milton Keynes.

Exactly how this will make Oxford's local economy more "sustainable" is unclear. Large retail developments threaten the small shops and independent traders that are the lifeblood of any local economy. Numerous studies (by the New Economics Foundation²¹, amongst others) show how local shops recycle money back into communities and create more sustainable jobs and robust economies, while large chain stores suck money out of communities and into the pockets of large businesses and corporate shareholders instead.

A similar development in Basingstoke saw many local traders lose their livelihoods, and a study carried out in the late 90s suggested that trade on the Cowley Road could drop by 20% if the Westgate Centre was expanded (reference to follow).

The issue of staffing has also not been adequately addressed, as existing shops in Oxford already have difficulty finding and retaining staff. The claim that the Westgate expansion would "create jobs" is therefore an irrelevant one - Oxford already has too many shop jobs to go around - and the expansion plans do not explain where all of the necessary workers will come from. They will either have to commute from out of town - creating yet more pollution - or be drawn from existing Oxford shops, putting even more pressure on local traders.

The argument that the expansion will somehow bring environmental benefits by preventing local shoppers from travelling out of town is a rather strange one.

This would only be true if the number of people currently travelling out of Oxford every day in order to go shopping was bigger than the number of people who would be attracted to the new Westgate from out of town. Using the Westgate Partnership's own estimate of new weekly drivers as detailed in the "Transport" section above (3,000 - 3,500 per week), that means that there would only be a net benefit if around 3,500 people were currently driving long distances to out-of-town shops each week, but would come to the Westgate instead if only it was bigger. This seems unlikely, to say the least.

In an age of climate change and rising oil prices it seems bizarre to base Oxford's future economy on attracting shoppers from out of town. If the anticipated shoppers do not appear, lose interest or find that it makes more economic (and environmental) sense to shop locally, then Oxford will be left with an outsized retail centre that the city cannot support.

Privatisation of Public Land - from common good to private gain

The Developers Say:

"The proposals for landscaping and public realm are designed to create pedestrianised areas and facilitate permeability across the development. Furthermore Paradise Square will be upgraded and remodelled and a newly landscaped area along Castle Mill Stream will be opened to the public."

What They Aren't Telling You:

To make this expansion happen, land owned by the Council - in other words, land owned by us, the public - is being sold to a private developer to build shops and private housing. This is, quite simply, the privatisation of public space. The proposed "public green spaces" in the plan consist of small areas of concrete, shrubs and patches of grass. A truly public space would actively involve the community in its design, creation and upkeep; a piece of landscaping dropped next to a giant shopping centre in order to make it look a bit less unsightly doesn't really count.

The Westgate expansion has been - very openly - designed to draw in out-of-town trade, not to benefit local people. The potential to develop this space in a positive and environmentally sensitive way that would benefit the city and its residents is huge, but has not yet been explored.

Consultation Process - decisions behind closed doors

The Developers Say:

"The Westgate development has been brought forward through an iterative process of consultation, participation, review and assessment. The Westgate Partnership has been through a detailed consultation process in advance of the submission of the planning application and continues to liaise with statutory consultees and key stakeholders in Oxford. **Six stages of public consultation have been carried out:**

1. To identify key stakeholders with an interest in the proposed development. These included political figures, statutory and non-statutory consultees with an important input into the planning process and the media.
2. With the appointment of a new project design team, a number of workshops with stakeholders led to the drawing up of the masterplan for the Westgate site. In March 2004, four public workshops and two stakeholder workshops were conducted by Opinion Leader Research on behalf of The Westgate Partnership.
3. A 'Response to Consultation' document addressing consultation feedback on the masterplan was produced in September 2005.
4. In October 2005 a public exhibition at the Westgate Centre and further round of workshops was held.
5. In response to the exhibition and workshops a series of letters and further presentations to key stakeholders took place.
6. A series of presentations of the scheme design in advance of the submission of the planning application.

"The Westgate Partnership established a number of forums and steering groups to examine strategic transport and design issues including relevant members of The Westgate Partnership's professional team and officers of the City and County Councils to maintain dialogue with stakeholder groups through the consultation process.

"The planning application documents were made available at Oxford City Council's offices and on their website with electronic copies available to the public at no expense.

As a major planning application accompanied by an Environmental Statement, the Local Planning Authority formally consulted the Environment Agency, English Heritage, the highways authority, and in addition, CABE and the Government Office for the South East.

"The scheme has benefited from both an inclusive and partnership approach to consultation ensuring that all relevant interests have been given the opportunity to influence this key development."

What They Aren't Telling You:

The "consultation process" for the expansion was a minimal exercise that left most of the population of Oxford in the dark about the scale of the plans.

Taking each of the Partnership's points in turn:

Points 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 talk about consultation through "workshops" and "presentations". In other words, the bulk of the consultation did not involve communication with the wider public, just small groups of selected "stakeholders", internal Council meetings, and the occasional focus group.

Point 3 describes the "public exhibition" of the plans. This involved a display in the Westgate Centre itself, essentially asking shoppers whether they wanted more shops(!), and a small display in an obscure corridor in the Town Hall. There was little external communication to let Oxford residents know that these "exhibitions" existed, or that a "Masterplan" (a summary of the draft plans) was available on the Council's website.

The consultation documents and public displays were designed to present the development in a positive light, and did not describe the projected traffic increase or the loss of the trees and Abbey Place. These only became an explicit part of the plans after the consultation process was over.

None of this could be described as meaningful consultation with the Oxford public. The whole process was, in fact, extraordinarily undemocratic. The original plans (in 2004) included a new public transport hub, the pedestrianisation of Queen Street, and did not require the demolition of Abbey Place or the loss of mature trees. All of these elements were quietly changed during the application process, without proper democratic input from elected councillors or Oxford residents.

The approval of the planning application took place at a meeting of the Strategic Development Control Committee (SDCC) in 2006. Fourteen separate objections to the plans were presented to the committee, but to little avail; the plans were approved with councillors clearly voting along party lines (Liberal Democrat and Labour in favour, Greens against) although planning decisions are legally required to be taken independently, outside the political party system. At least one councillor who voted for the plans reportedly admitted after the meeting that they were simply voting the way they had been told by senior party members²².

All of the documents associated with the planning process are now available on the City Council's website - except for the objections to the proposal. These were originally on the site, but have now been removed - which seems to be common practice for Oxford's planning website. This is extremely misleading, as it makes it seem as though the proposal passed through the committee without protest or dissent, and denies Oxford residents the chance to review the problems associated with proposals such as this.

Conclusion

- the wrong development, in the wrong place, at the wrong time

As Oxford residents, we are not opposed to development in the city centre. It is possible to envision all kinds of positive things that could be done with the current Westgate site - showcasing zero-carbon building and design, creating public green spaces, expanding Oxford's public transport and cycling facilities, building a significant number of affordable homes, designing shop units or market space specifically to support the independent local traders.

These are just a few examples - whenever we talk to our fellow Oxford residents about how they'd like to see this part of town regenerated, they are full of exciting and positive ideas. The trouble is, that up until now no-one has asked them.

The proposed development would do none of these things. Despite the fine claims and green posturing of the developers and planning officers, it is a totally inappropriate, destructive and backward-looking project that is being dumped on our city without the knowledge or consent of most of its residents.

We are calling on all residents of Oxford to join us in rejecting this plan and campaigning for an alternative regeneration that makes sense for Oxford's residents, environment, and present and future economy. Time is running out, but with your help, we can succeed - especially if we can persuade John Lewis to live up to their ethical credentials and support our campaign for a saner city centre development.

To find out what you can do see the Action page of our website: <http://westgatewatch.wordpress.com> or email: oxfordagainstwestgate@activist.com to join our mailing list and start making a difference!

Footnotes:

- 1 <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/council/meeting-diary.cfm/document/17049/>
- 2 <http://www.westgateoxford.co.uk/>
- 3 http://www.johnlewis.com/jl_assets/pdf/corporate/jlcsr07.pdf
- 4 Emails from John Lewis to local campaigners, January 2008
- 5 www.oxford.gov.uk/files/sealsodocs/69313/CPO%203.pdf
- 6 8,000 cars use the Westgate car park on a Saturday; figures for weekdays are unavailable so we have made a conservative assumption of 4,000 - 5,000
- 7 Sushila Dhall, pers. comm.
- 8 http://www.oxfordmail.net/display.var.2064302.0.smoke_signals.php
- 9 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007. Fourth Assessment Report. Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Summary for Policymakers, Table SPM.6. http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr_spm.pdf
- 10 Compared to emissions in 2000
- 11 Based on UN population projections for the year 2050 from <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp> and year 2000 emissions from the IPCC report, as above
- 12 See http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/publications/briefing_notes/bn17.pdf and http://www.sussex.ac.uk/spru/documents/anderson_slides.ppt
- 13 For examples, see NASA research at <http://www.giss.nasa.gov/research/news/20070530/>
- 14 <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/planning/nria-spd.cfm>
- 15 Sushila Dhall, pers. comm.
- 16 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/treesintownsii>
- 17 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/feb/20/conservation.trees?gusrc=rss&feed=environment>
- 18 In conversation with Jess Worth during an anti-Westgate demonstration at John Lewis headquarters
- 19 Email from John Lewis to local campaigners, February 2008
- 20 <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/files/sealsodocs/23923/RNS%20exec%20Sum.pdf>
- 21 <http://www.neweconomics.org>
- 22 Elise Benjamin (SDCC Chair), pers comm

'But Mr Dent, the plans have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months.'

'Oh yes, well as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn't exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them had you? I mean like actually telling anybody or anything.'

'But the plans were on display ...'
'On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them.'

'That's the display department.'
'With a torch.'

'Ah, well the lights had probably gone.'

'So had the stairs.'

'But look, you found the notice didn't you?'

'Yes,' said Arthur, 'yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying Beware of the Leopard.'

- *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, Douglas Adams