

BALANCING OXFORDSHIRE'S GROWTH IN A CLIMATE-CHANGE EMERGENCY

A proposal by Planning Oxfordshire's Environment
and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

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The Aim

1. Not least because we now have a Climate Emergency, we must critically examine the housing numbers being proposed for Oxfordshire. We need to have an approach which balances the desire for growth against environmental imperatives – and in particular carbon targets.
2. At the same time we should ensure that a greater proportion of what new housing is built, meets local and social needs and is located where it could best be served by public transport, cycling and walking.
3. To do this we need an open, consultative approach which engages the generations who will be most affected.

The Problem

4. Oxfordshire will become a County of suburban sprawl unless planning and transport policy changes. It faces an existential threat which in some ways mirrors that facing our planet.
5. Almost certainly one of the reasons for this is that there is currently a democratic deficit in planning. The so-called Growth Board (a give-away title) is not directly elected, and appears to pay more attention to quangos such as the Local Enterprise Partnership and the National Infrastructure Commission than to local electors.

Inter-related pressures

Oxford 'Overspill'

6. The current round of Local Plans contains proposals for some 15 thousand dwellings for Oxford 'overspill'. Many of these are proposed in the Green Belt. However, independent consultants have concluded that the original need figures on which they were based are wrong - and are indeed roughly double what they should be.
7. Moreover, the current Oxford Local Plan seeks to reserve brownfield land for future employment rather than housing, thus exacerbating the imbalance between jobs and housing in the City.
8. It is therefore quite possible that Oxford's real needs could be satisfied - much more sustainably – within the City itself.
9. Bizarrely, the preparation and examination of the Oxford Local Plan has lagged behind those of the surrounding Districts. As things stand, the case for housing development to take place in the Green Belt will not be tested until after such land has been released in those Districts. No sane planning system would allow this to happen, but this is what is currently in train.
10. Much of what is being proposed is intended to be at relatively low densities, and it seems likely that very little will turn out to be 'affordable' - and with hardly any provision of much needed (and more properly affordable) social housing. Unless common sense can prevail, as things stand, large swathes of the Oxford Green Belt will be lost to unsustainable, low density suburban development, much of which will be swept up by London commuters.

11. And all of this is in sharp contrast to decisions taken by successive Secretaries of State that the City's growth should be limited to protect the gem that is Oxford.

The Growth Deal

12. Plans for the County's development are currently being driven by the Oxfordshire Growth Board. Its voting members are the leaders of the County and five District Councils, but it is not directly elected and the Board's non-voting membership includes several champions of growth.

13. The Board has acclaimed a 'Growth Deal' with the Government. In return for enabling the development of 100,000 dwellings by 2031, the Government has promised some infrastructure funding. However the amount promised so far is less than 5% of the Growth Board's own conservative estimate of what is needed. Yet the Deal will add over one-third to the County's existing housing stock. The inevitable outcome is therefore a worsening of shortfalls in essential services, increasing traffic congestion, pollution, and loss of valued environment. Given that the Growth Board hailed the deal as a success, one shudders to think what failure would look like.

14. Despite the Government claiming that environmental factors are of equal importance, and stating in 'A Green Future', its 25 year plan for the environment, that any development should lead to environmental net gain, it is hard to find evidence for this in the way Oxfordshire Plans are progressing. Nationally carbon emissions from transport are still rising.

15. To date, the Growth Board (from its name, to its composition, to its decisions) appears to be focussed almost exclusively on maximising housing and employment growth. Although it has now started preparing a strategic plan for Oxfordshire to 2050, early work indicates that the Board wishes to take the current round of Local Plans and the Growth Deal as commitments.

16. Finally there is the proposal by the National Infrastructure Commission to build a motorway standard Expressway between Oxford and Cambridge. There is no credible transport case for the road, which would run counter to national and local transport policies (which purport to favour a move from private to public transport) and it would be directly in conflict with the need urgently to reduce carbon emissions from transport. Its justification seems mainly to rely on using the road as a peg to attach further housing as part of a so-called Arc; best estimates seem to indicate a **further 200,000** dwellings in Oxfordshire.

17. **All this would entail building more dwellings than those that have previously ever been built in Oxfordshire over the last thousand years** – and so far seems to have been taken as a commitment for Oxfordshire 2050.

The National Context

18. It is interesting that two of the most persuasive voices to remind people of the existential crisis that the planet faces have come from opposite ends of the age spectrum: Sir David Attenborough 93, and Greta Thunberg 16.

19. It is imperative that any planning for Oxfordshire is set in the context of the climate emergency we face. As we have seen, there are few encouraging

signs that there is real recognition by action, rather than platitudinous statement.

20. This is, in significant part, because there is little coherent planning at Government level. Other than some developer friendly guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Government strategic aspirations for land use and transport planning across England are largely absent. In contrast Wales and Scotland have some national spatial planning. The recent 'Raynsford' report for the Town and Country Planning Association describes the current arrangements in England as a 'chaotic patchwork of responsibilities', and makes a number of suggestions for improving the planning process - including the capture by the public sector of betterment (the raised value of land permitted for development). Meanwhile the Government seems to plan by threat, appeal and knee-jerk response.

21. Neither is there any coherent regional policy. Despite occasional 'soundbite' initiatives (such as 'Northern Powerhouse') it is generally unclear what Government's long term ambitions are for development in regions outside London and the South East. Rather than abandoning the regions to their own social and economic fate, regional policy could be used as a key component of Government response to the Climate Change Commission report.

22. Certainly there remains real housing need in many areas of the South East. However the Government's housing provision model is broken.

23. The heavily subsidised sale of council houses from the 1980s onwards, together with the fiscal policies of successive governments preventing their replacement has led to a dwindling stock of Council and other social housing. The Shelter report 'A Vision for Social Housing' highlights that there are now some one and a half million fewer social houses. Bluntly, the loss of these underpins today's housing shortages.

24. Instead, recent governments have relied on a largely private housing provision model and an NPPF slanted towards the large housebuilders. However, the large housebuilders' business model relies on keeping house prices high and achieving completions at a rate behind demand.

25. Government recently set an arbitrary target of 300,000 dwellings per year across England, yet building-starts struggle to get much above the 200,000 mark. Moreover, as Shelter has pointed out, many government initiatives to reach the target (such as Help to Buy on which £9 billion has already been spent!) actually raise house prices. In any event, the housing shortage is qualitative not simply quantitative. **The 300,000 figure was neared or reached by both Tory and Labour governments through the 1950s and 1960s, only because Local Authorities were building nearly half.**

26. Government pays some £10 billion a year (about half of all its housing benefit) to private landlords because of a lack of social housing. It is in many senses, wasted money, as the public sector has nothing at the end for it. Indeed £2 billion of this is utterly wasted (as the private sector is dearer). This is a national scandal – and could itself cover the building costs of over 10,000 social homes annually. The Shelter report suggests that 150,000 social

houses per year should be built over the next 30 years, paid for in large part by savings on housing benefits.

What we need in Oxfordshire

27. It will be apparent that future planning in the county should:

- place Climate Change issues at its heart
- embrace a genuinely consultative conversation with the public, environmental and business groups about what is acceptable/sustainable, with a particular focus on engaging young people
- seek the proper balance between environmental and economic considerations, commensurate with the declared Climate Change Emergency, not least in terms of transport emissions
- pause the remaining Local Plans pending proper consideration of real housing need
- reconsider, and if appropriate, renegotiate the Growth Deal, and in particular
- restart Oxfordshire 2050 on a blank canvas

What we need from Government

28. Future planning in England should embrace a serious, long-term (and hopefully cross-party) commitment to addressing climate change via co-ordinated and joined up policy initiatives. This should certainly include:

- the scrapping of the Oxford-to-Cambridge Expressway – for which, given all the above, there is no credible justification
- an expedited – and electrified from the start – construction of E-W Rail using a small proportion of the savings above
- a comprehensive National and Regional Land Use and Transport Plan addressing climate change, social issues of deprived areas, (and at the same time maximising embedded investment)
- encouraging local authorities to build new social housing (building up to say 100,000 units pa by 2025), offsetting the capital costs against future savings, together with reconsideration of flawed subsidies to the private sector