Oxfordshire's draft Local Transport and Connectivity Plan

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

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POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

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Summary of Key Points

1. POETS fully supports and endorses the ambition and aspirations of the draft plan and wishes to commend the county council for recognising the urgency of tackling climate and congestion and putting forward realistic proposals to address these issues.
2. In particular, POETS supports
   a) the intention of making cycling, walking and public transport use the natural first choice for travel around Oxfordshire
   b) the ambitious targets for reducing car journeys in the county
   c) the move towards a "Decide and Provide" approach for determining new investment priorities
   d) challenging targets for increasing performance and patronage in the forthcoming Bus Strategy
   e) a step-change in the quality of provision for cycling and walking
   f) a strong emphasis on the need to prioritise local rail services in the forthcoming Rail Strategy.
3. For the plan to be successfully implemented however, the county council will need to
   a) raise additional sources of funding, including the Workplace Parking Levy in Oxford
   b) substantially reduce the number of proposed policies to ensure the key priorities cannot get overlooked or compromised
   c) ensure future major development is located close to excellent public transport facilities
   d) ensure the "Decide and Provide" principle is applied consistently across the whole county
   e) urgently review all its capital schemes, particularly those in the Area Strategies, to ensure they are consistent with the new policies and priorities, pausing implementation of any measures that are not contractually committed
   f) reallocate funding away from schemes designed to provide a general increase in capacity, and towards schemes that prioritise walking, cycling and public transport
   g) restructure the relevant council departments to ensure they are aligned to the new priorities.

Background to the Plan

4. This plan will supersede the previous Local Transport Plan (LTP4). The policies in LTP4 were broadly sound, but have borne only a limited relationship to what has been happening on the ground in Oxfordshire during its lifetime. Many of the central elements such as the Bus Rapid Transit Network have hardly progressed at all. Other policies have been applied inconsistently and partially. The county council has, for example, failed to oppose development in totally unsuitable locations such as Chalgrove Airfield.

5. One consequence is that the most recent round of district council local plans has seen much land allocated for new development in locations where future car dependency is effectively built-in. Elsewhere the approach has too often been to seek to accommodate additional movement by increasing road capacity rather than focussing on maximising opportunities for travel by non-car modes, an approach which is continuing today. We now see pressures all over the county to provide for additional traffic and parking which will make it harder for future traffic reductions to be achieved.
6. As a consequence, traffic levels and congestion have increased, bus patronage has been falling and improvements to walking and cycling have been minimal. While funding constraints - which amongst other things have led to withdrawal of most supported bus services – have played a part, the county council must accept a major share of the blame for the failure of LTP4. This new plan should be seen as an opportunity for a fresh start which should be grasped with vigour.
7. It is surprising that the new plan and documents do not seem to contain a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of LTP4. It is critically important that lessons are learned to ensure previous mistakes are not repeated.

The Draft Local Transport & Connectivity Plan

8. The new draft plan is comprehensive and extensive, reflects the climate emergency and recognises the crucial relationship between transport, health and community. As such it is to be commended and POETS fully endorses its scope and aspiration. It is internally coherent and builds a convincing case for most of the policies and targets it contains. Seeking to make public (and shared) transport, walking and cycling, the natural first choice for as many trips as possible is the right approach.
9. The eye-catching headline targets to remove or replace 1 out of every 4 current car trips by 2030 and 1 out of every 3 by 2040 are bold but reflect the urgency to address the climate emergency as well as wider health, environmental and mobility needs. As such, they echo the targets recently set by the Scottish government and an increasing number of English local authorities and transport bodies. Importantly, they are consistent with the Department for Transport's Decarbonisation Plan.
10. Crucially the targets recognise that simply converting our motor vehicles over time to electric power will not eliminate the carbon embedded in vehicle manufacture and use, nor would it result in the immediate reduction in carbon in our atmosphere which is needed urgently now.
11. Traffic reduction would also reduce pollution from tyres and brakes, free up space for better public transport and more active travel and lead to better health and reduced road casualties. Less land allocated for parked cars, provides the opportunity for other uses such as housing, more green space etc (See paragraphs 25-27 below).

Reducing Car Trips and Demand Management

12. Despite the continuing pressures from population and employment growth, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the potential for people to

change their travel patterns and habits. The reduction in travel intensity at peak times has been particularly significant. The use of digital technology in particular has allowed many activities to be undertaken without requiring any physical travel at all. This clearly demonstrates the potential for a substantial change in the ways much travel in Oxfordshire is undertaken. It is well understood that just reducing traffic by 10% - as happens during school holidays for example – has a huge impact on congestion and travel reliability. If this level of vehicle trips can be taken off the network then many of the currently planned schemes for increasing road capacity would no longer be needed and the funding switched to improving facilities for travel by other modes.

13. The decision to move towards an approach of "Decide and Provide" as opposed to the current outdated "Predict and Provide" methodology for new transport investment will be crucially important in ensuring that measures implemented meet policy priorities and imperatives rather than simply seeking to accommodate additional movement on the network which has consistently been the approach in Oxfordshire (outside of Oxford).

14. It is essential that this approach is applied consistently countywide to ensure that we do not see measures developed in any parts of the county – as happens currently – that will increase traffic in one locality without any regard being paid to the impact on adjoining areas. The council must ensure that the county's highway network is in future treated as one inter-connected whole and develop its modelling and procedures accordingly.

15. Other measures of demand management whether by physical measures or fiscal means will be crucially important to successful delivery of the plan.

Providing Alternatives to the Car

16. The successful delivery of a new Bus Strategy will be crucial to the success of the plan. Bus operators and passengers have experienced increasing congestion and unreliability over the life of LTP4. Measures to free buses from traffic delays must now be given the highest priority for capital investment if we are going to turn this around and begin to increase patronage on public transport. At crucial points on the network this will necessitate a reduction in capacity for other traffic.

17. It is recognised that the fall in patronage during the Covid pandemic is having a serious impact on the viability of bus services, many of which have already been reduced or withdrawn. If the government is serious about decarbonisation of transport however, then it will surely provide continued support to operators while patronage recovers from the effects of the pandemic and provide substantial sums for new investment as part of its Bus Back Better strategy. It is essential that the county council is ready and waiting with a bold and clearly defined countywide plan to take advantage of these opportunities as it will doubtless be in competition with other authorities for the funds as they become available.

18. While improvements to the operating environment should enable more bus services to operate commercially, in the more rural parts of Oxfordshire the county will also need to find a way to fund more services where conventional bus operations are not viable either by way of direct support or alternative kinds of service.

19. It is important that the county's forthcoming Bus Strategy sets ambitious and challenging targets for increasing patronage and operational performance.

20. While the greater part of the modal shift away from the car needs to be towards buses, the plan rightly recognises the huge potential for encouraging more people to cycle, which will also provide health benefits and environmental improvements in our towns. The range of proposals for new cycle facilities set out in the plan are substantial and welcome. The arrival of reliable electric bicycles also means that many more people could comfortably undertake 5-10 mile journeys on two wheels and the greater use of cargo bikes could make a significant difference within our towns, if appropriate infrastructure is provided.

21. Today however too often we continue to see cycling facilities within areas of new development tacked on almost as an afterthought to car-dominated layouts, frequently requiring cyclists to give way, dismount and divert off their route. On existing roads, where cycle facilities exist, they are often inadequate and discontinuous, often squeezed in almost as a token gesture. If the county is serious about achieving its targets to increase cycling, from now on cycle facilities must be provided consistently, continuously and to high standards.

22. Another current discouragement of cycling in Oxfordshire is poor maintenance. Cycle tracks are often restricted by vegetation growth, with surfaces covered in accumulated debris. On-carriageway facilities are often located where there are depressed gullies and poor trench reinstatements. For growth in cycling to be maximised it is essential that these facilities are given a much higher priority for maintenance and Policy 53 on asset management needs to be altered to reflect this.

23. Cycling is another area where government seems committed to offering authorities capital funding for new measures. The county council should develop all of its plans for walking and cycling routes and networks as quickly as possible, to ensure it is ready to capture the maximum government funding as it becomes available.

24. The Plan recognises the potential for more rail travel and the need for greater investment. At both national and regional levels however, there are great expectations for expansion of capacity on the network, but funding constraints will mean that progress will be slow. In looking forward to the future Rail Strategy, it is essential that the council makes the strongest possible case for prioritising investment in local rail services to complement the reduction in car use it wants to see.

Parking Management

25. On average a car is parked for 96% of its life. As well as this being a huge underutilisation of valuable resources, parked cars have a huge impact on our lives. Narrow streets (and footways) in our towns are blocked by parked cars, while large spaces are given over to car parks, valuable land which could be put to many more worthwhile uses. Most new developments contain large paved areas reserved for cars, which for many houses are as large as their gardens.

26. To address this sterilisation of valuable land, the council should be doing more to encourage car clubs and shared ownership schemes, whereby people have access to a car when they need one, but do not have the responsibility of owning

one. This would also be more in keeping with a future world which might well contain more autonomous cars, and when fewer young people are aspiring to own their own cars. In the past, car clubs have predominantly been established in urban areas, but they should also be provided in rural areas and now would be a good time to incorporate them into new developments. The reduction in land take would facilitate a combination of higher densities, larger gardens or the provision of more communal open space. If people do not directly pay for their own car, they are much more likely to walk, cycle or take public transport for some of their trips.

27. The new plan should incorporate a policy to support greater establishment of car clubs and car sharing, particularly within all significant new developments.

Managing New Development

28. Much new development in Oxfordshire in recent times has been located in places with minimal local amenities, little provision for walking and cycling and remote from good public transport facilities. The consequence for residents has been an over-reliance on the car for their essential travel and contributed to increasing congestion and environmental harm across the whole county. This issue has been perfectly encapsulated in the work of Transport for New Homes, a Community Interest Company. Its latest report, "Building Car Dependency", (see https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Building-Car-Dependency-2022.pdf?utm_source=TfNH_website&utm_medium=website_pdf&utm_campaign=report_launch) emphasises the repeated failures of local authorities to prevent new developments which build in car-dependency, and makes specific reference to Great Western Park in Didcot and Barton Park on the edge of Oxford.

29. Appendix 2 of the draft plan "Guidance and standards for new development" contains a lot of detail about how to achieve good sustainable design within a development. It fails however, to emphasise the crucial message that new development of any scale must be located where high quality public transport is available for travel not just throughout the locality, but crucially for trips beyond the new development.

30. There needs to be a new policy and a statement at the top of Appendix 2 that explicitly opposes any new development in locations where high quality public transport facilities do not exist or where there is no realistic prospect of viable services being provided. All of Oxfordshire's district councils have declared climate emergencies and need to be working closely with the county council to ensure all future development is directed to locations well served by public transport.

Direction of Travel and Area Strategies

31. At this moment in time, the county council is still developing and implementing schemes to increase road capacity rather than developing measures that seek to accommodate the same level of movement by maximising the use of alternative modes to the car. This appears contrary to the policies of LTP4 and should be discontinued immediately before the new plan is in place.

32. If one looks at the lists of schemes for example contained in the Area Strategies in Appendix 5, measures to increase road capacity dominate. Work on most of

these measures should be paused pending a fundamental review of all these Area strategies which should be reassessed having regard to the policies and targets set out in the new plan and application of the "Decide and Provide" principle. To do otherwise will not only worsen the base position from which traffic reduction must commence, but will also use up much of the precious funding needed to bring about future change.

Funding

33. The success of the plan will depend on appropriate levels of funding. At the present time, bus and rail services are at risk following the drop in patronage during the pandemic and threatened withdrawal of government support. Future enhancement of rail services is largely dependent on direct government funding and the immediate prospects are poor.

34. There is no reason to believe that the county council can expect any significant increases in funding from central government in the near future, whether capital or revenue. It is crucially important therefore to ensure that what funding is available -including from new development - is invested in measures that directly support the plan's priorities. This points again to the need to immediately switch funding generally away from schemes that are designed to increase road capacity and towards measures to enhance active travel and public transport use and can lead to a reduction in the volume of traffic on our roads.

35. The current funding pressures across the transport sphere as a whole suggest that additional sources of finance will be required if the objectives are going to be achieved. In this context, it would appear that the introduction of a Workplace Parking Levy (WPL) in Oxford will be essential and possibly also a limited congestion charging scheme.

Delivery

36. The draft plan contains some 93 policies, with others included in the supporting strategies, covering the whole range of transport related issues. Many of these are quite general in nature and are more a statement of good working practice than strategically important policies. There is a clear risk that the sheer scale of the plan will lead to a lack of focus and dilution of priorities. POETS would argue that the number of policies should be significantly reduced and fundamentally that the core policies of reducing traffic and increasing walking, cycling and public transport use are given primacy over others.

37. The change in direction needed to deliver the new plan will be immense. It will require a major change both in the culture and organisation of the county council if it is to be successfully delivered. The importance of this to successful delivery of the plan should not be underestimated.

38. The neutral observer must often wonder how and why transport infrastructure in Oxfordshire is so often badly designed and implemented and with seemingly little regard for the people who are going to use it, particularly pedestrians and cyclists. POETS advocates regular – at least quarterly – audits whereby key councillors and officers visit different parts of the county to experience the walking, cycling and public transport facilities in the way local people do.

Conclusions

39. POETS welcomes the ambition and coherence of the draft plan and is fully supportive of its broad thrust and policies and targets. The move towards the principle of "Decide and Provide", so long as it is applied comprehensively, is particularly welcomed.

40. Successful delivery will however require a fundamental change in direction for the county council. It needs to urgently move away from introducing schemes that increase general road capacity and focus instead on measures that encourage more use of public transport and more cycling and walking.

41. In future, new development must be located where high quality public transport facilities exist and actively opposed where they don't.