POETS
Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

The Greater Oxford Development Corporation – *Could it work?*

A POETS Briefing Paper

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With Government now apparently set on introducing a *Greater Oxford Development Corporation (GODC)*, POETS have been looking at the proposals. Will it just mean burning the rulebook and giving developers free rein? Or is there any way of making it a democratic and well-funded strategic approach to sustainable development?

POETS' view

POETS urge our current democratically elected representatives to do all in their power to ensure that if the GODC goes ahead, it adopts the guiding principles set out below. Only in this way can we hope that the Greater Oxford area will avoid the growth at all costs mantra and instead benefit from a strategic and sustainable approach to development.

The powers and budget invested in the proposed GODC have the potential to circumvent local democracy (and any bothersome environmental factors), unleashing a 'growth at all costs' agenda on the Greater Oxford area, including parishes surrounding the City[1]. Whilst various housing figures are being bandied about, the ambition is clearly for a level of growth that could come close to doubling the number of homes in the next 15-20 years. Much less is said about who this growth will benefit or how matching infrastructure will be provided.

In terms of transport infrastructure alone, growth on anywhere near the levels proposed will simply be undeliverable based on current policies. Radical change would be required to avoid gridlock and system collapse.

Nonetheless, a strategic approach to development in Oxfordshire is long overdue and, if it were done well, could be transformational in helping to tackle not just our affordable housing and poverty crises but also our climate, nature and health emergencies.

So if, as seems likely, the Government is determined to press ahead, there are a number of guiding principles that have the potential to make the GODC something to which we could all give at least a cautious welcome.

[1] See p4 Possible Boundaries.

The overall principle should be that development needs to be for the benefit of the many, not the few.

- **Democratic accountability & transparency** -

  a) Local accountability of board members is essential. We support the appointment of local authority representatives to the board; however, we believe their influence will be limited by the fact the board is accountable to the Secretary of State and not the local population. This should be changed. Local authority representatives should be appointed to key positions on the board and ideally hold overall control.

  b) Selection of other board members is key – whilst it is appropriate to have development industry representatives, the Board will have no legitimacy unless it also has representatives from sectors including environment, affordable housing, agriculture/farming, employment, heritage and the community and voluntary sectors, appointed in sufficient numbers to have an effective voice.

  c) The GODC must commit to Board meetings that are open to the public, with opportunities for questions, and publicly available agendas and minutes (as per the current Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee).

  d) Plan making powers should ideally remain with democratically elected local planning authorities.

- **Adequate funding** – the Government has currently committed £800 million to the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor. Timescales are unclear, but assuming this to be over a 10-year period and that the Oxford area gets 25% of the funds, that releases just £20 million a year. To put that in context, the current HIF1 budget for a new road from Didcot to Clifton Hampden is over £400 million.

- **Land value capture** - a much greater proportion of the substantial increase in the value of land must be recovered for investment in infrastructure, affordable housing, public services and community benefits.

- The targets in the current Oxfordshire Local Transport Plan 5 should be met. Given the proposed levels of growth, the development of a **strategic mass transit network** based on fast, frequent, reliable and interconnected public transport will be obligatory.

- At least **50% of new housing should be social housing for rent**.

- Strategy should be developed in line with the **Land Use Framework** developed by DEFRA[2]. This sets out an approach to balancing the need for key land uses including food, housing, energy and nature, to create multifunctional landscapes.

- There should be a very significant increase in the amount of **publicly accessible green open space** within a short walk of people's homes.

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/land-use-framework

- **Climate change** - high and enforceable targets and standards must be adhered to, addressing both mitigation and adaptation needs. Ideally there would be legislation to address the need for retrofitting existing building stock.
- **Biodiversity** – high and enforceable targets and standards must be adhered to, focused on delivering the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- The **historic character and setting of Oxford** within its landscape is of national and international importance and must be fully recognised.
- **Development should meet the needs of all communities, particularly those at present experiencing poverty, low wages and the impact of unaffordable housing costs.**
- **Rural communities should be supported**, not overwhelmed, by any development.
- To achieve all of the above, the GODC will require a plausible **strategic plan** with its geography spelt out in reasonable detail. Otherwise, we risk a continuation of the 'developer makes the plan' approach which would leave no space for a credible transport system to serve it. (Ideally, a new council would be elected on the basis of a manifesto spelling out what the GODC would do, and then empowered to do it, rather than giving powers to a Corporation that hasn't spelt out what it does intend to do, except *build*.)

Essentially, the government, and any new development corporation, need to provide reassurance to residents of Oxford and Oxfordshire that their quality of life will improve and not deteriorate as a result of the new development that is proposed; that residents of the city and county will have some genuine say and input to the way in which development is implemented; and that key natural and cultural heritage assets will be identified, conserved and enhanced during the development process. This is even more pressing given the hiatus that local government re-organisation is likely to cause at the time of the establishment of the GODC.

BACKGROUND

What is a Development Corporation (DC)?

A DC is an appointed body accountable to the government with powers and a remit to initiate development. DCs are intended to be 'streamlined' and to speed up decision-making to bring forward delivery. There have been various rounds of DCs starting with the New Towns, then developing into the Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) of the Thatcher era, further UDCs under the Blair government and the Mayoral UDCs of the Cameron/Johnson years. Each round has its own objectives, legislation and funding arrangements. Governments like them as they, in effect, bypass local government and have useful powers of land assembly, planning and delivery. Being governed by appointees they are also more accountable to central government than local areas and are therefore seen as a 'safer' bet in terms of spending direct government funding.

The Greater Oxford Development Corporation

GODC was announced by Rachel Reeves in March 2026 as part of an announcement on the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor. GODC will receive part of the £800 million funding for the OxCam corridor, available for 'buying new land and building infrastructure to kickstart development around Oxford and Cambridge, backing new homes, labs and workspaces to supercharge future growth'.

Possible Powers

Final details have not yet been provided. However, from the experience of the Cambridge area, the scope and remit of GODC is likely to include the following, as described by law firm Mishcon de Reya[3];

- Planning powers: including both plan-making and development management functions; planning applications above specified thresholds will be determined solely by the GODC.
- Infrastructure and transport delivery: powers to co-ordinate and deliver transport and other infrastructure necessary to support strategic development and to ensure social infrastructure is provided upfront either with partners or if not to use its powers to plan and fund any essential infrastructure.
- Land acquisition and disposal: powers to acquire land by agreement or other powers, assemble fragmented or stalled sites, remediate contaminated land, and dispose of land to facilitate development, often at uplifted value.
- Financial powers and functions: access to central government grants and borrowing, ability to develop assets and reinvest income in growth, together with mechanisms to capture land value uplift and attract investment from public and private sector partners.

Possible Boundary

It is possible that the boundaries of the GODC and the proposed new unitary Greater Oxford Council would be the same. This would cover the current City area plus most of the parishes currently within or partly within the Oxford Green Belt. Government statements refer to 'fast-tracking' decisions to provide an identical, aligned local government partner to match the Development Corporation's footprint. Following a review period, the Government announced on 29 October that it had re-confirmed its decision to press ahead with the formation of a unitary Greater Oxford Council. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/local-government-reorganisation-moves-forward-in-five-counties

[3] https://www.mishcon.com/news/supercharging-growth-the-greater-oxford-development-corporation

Governance

Governance will likely be by a board of appointees accountable to the Secretary of State and Government. DC chairs are usually from the private sector. The Cambridge DC chair was head [4]of Homes England and Argent (a property development company), so also combines public sector experience. Local councillors are also appointed, however if the same conditions apply as the UDCs of the 80s, members are appointed in a personal capacity not as councillors representing their local community. Members are not elected, presenting a major issue of lack of local accountability. In addition, there will be a Chief Executive and other paid officers and staff.

Timeline

The final Oxford Growth Commission report is expected this Autumn. This may well coincide with further details of the proposed DC and a possible 8-week consultation period. If the Cambridge model is followed: 'The public will be asked to give feedback on the Corporation's exact boundary lines, required planning and infrastructure powers, and how local democratic representation will be preserved'.[5]

Greater Cambridge Development Corporation

Things are already underway in Cambridge – see: **https://thecgc.org.uk/**

FURTHER INFO

For more information on POETS and our Vision for Oxfordshire see www.poetsplanningoxon.uk

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[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/establishing-a-development-corporation-in-greater-cambridge/establishing-a-development-corporation-in-greater-cambridge#powers-and-functions
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/establishing-a-development-corporation-in-greater-cambridge