Oxford's Economic Strategy

Consultation Survey

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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1. POETS are pleased at the Oxford Economic Strategy's emphasis on an inclusive and zero carbon economy. Both aim to tackle important and complex issues facing Oxford.

2. However, POETS are concerned that the strategy **will exacerbate Oxford's current imbalance between housing and jobs**. The strategy mentions 25,000 potential jobs in growth nodes (p.4): the city already cannot provide enough homes for its own population, relying on Green Belt land in adjacent districts to do this in the last round of Local Plans. A high number of new jobs in new employment areas would exacerbate the problem of much of the city's workforce commuting in from adjacent local authorities, with all the associated problems of congestion, air pollution and accidents. The proposed West End development is an example of development that will exacerbate the imbalance between jobs to housing in Oxford.

3. The strategy appears to give **scant recognition to the increasingly-recognised incompatibility between infinite economic growth and a finite planet**. Indeed, when one strips away some of the nods to the climate emergency and the importance of the environment, one is left with the impression of a rather old-fashioned economic strategy, which would not have looked out of place in the 1980s. It is disappointing that the City Council appears not to have drawn on the work of Kate Raworth, whose far more progressive and internationally renowned work on "doughnut economics" is being used to guide policy in Amsterdam and elsewhere, but apparently not in her home city of Oxford.

4. POETS also believe that there are significant **tensions in the strategy between i) an inclusive, zero carbon economy, and ii) a global economy**. Oxford gains much of its prestige and wealth from being an internationally important centre of education and tourism destination. However, continuing with such activity on the same terms as in the recent past will mean more international tourists (global) making more flights and other transport movements (inconsistent with zero carbon). Far more work is needed to demonstrate convincingly how such sectors can contribute to the zero carbon aspiration.

5. The economic sectors promoted by the strategy as 'leader on the global stage' – health and life sciences, technology and digital, creative production – generally require high skill levels. Again, the strategy does not explain how these sectors can be harnessed to support an inclusive economy that provides high-quality jobs for people with few educational qualifications. The idea of community wealth building (inclusive) is an excellent one, but seems to be undermined by promotion of international investment and an international workforce, and a focus on knowledge driven sectors.

6. The strategy also seems to **support the concept of an Ox-Cam Arc of high and rapid movements, which is inconsistent with both inclusion and zero carbon**. (Indeed the City Council has supported both the Oxfordshire "growth deal" with government, which entails damaging major road building, and the unsustainable proposals for the Arc). POETS are concerned that, where there are tensions in the strategy's implementation, the lure of a high-profile and

comparatively simple 'global' economy will win out over the more complicated and important process of reducing carbon emissions, and reducing the gap between rich and poor in Oxford. One example of this is the delivery plan, which starts with commercial space and high-tech industries, with later actions focused on 'reducing' or 'mitigating' the impacts of new development. Another is the council's support for the £40m A40 'improvements' triggered by the Oxford North development.

7. POETS are also concerned that the economic strategy **does not seem to take into account, and support, the positive changes wrought by Covid**. The strategy seems to assume that, post-Covid, the world will go back to how it was before, with high levels of tourism, increasing need for employment development, and high levels of commuting. Instead, POETS feel that the strategy could aim to consolidate many of the good things that Covid has brought about:

    - a disconnect between many jobs and the need for a physical 'job space';
    - a commensurate reduction in commuting;
    - acknowledgement that an 'agglomeration effect' is not necessary for effective collaboration with other regions/countries; and
    - a trend towards flexible working hours.

8. All of these suggest that the need for employment space is likely to reduce in the future, not increase as is suggested in the strategy.

9. POETS believe that Oxford's Economic Strategy should support the conversion of employment space into housing (albeit housing with generous-enough space to allow home working) and more flexible work-stations. It should plan for minimal or no new employment space in the city. It should use back-casting and modelling to determine what economic activities can achieve zero carbon: they are unlikely to feature significant international tourism and many movements between Oxford and Cambridge. It should be much clearer about how wealth building will be done, with 'global' action only where this helps the other two objectives. The strategy should take a monitor-and-manage approach to providing new employment space. And it should actively consider whether financing for local public services would be adequate to provide for the growth in jobs and housing envisaged.