Oxford Draft Local Plan 2040

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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POETS consider the city council has failed in its duty to cooperate and has not met the four tests of soundness in relation to two specific policies and sections of the draft plan. These are set out below:

Oxfordshire functions as a city region, and it is highly regrettable that joint work on the Oxfordshire Plan to 2050, which would have given a strategic approach to planning in the county, has ceased. This was due to the fundamental disagreement between the districts over the unrealistically high housing need assessments in the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment which led the Vale, South and West Oxfordshire to withdraw from the process. We recognise that the duty is a 'duty to co-operate' not a 'duty to agree', but there must be genuine, positive and continuous dialogue with the intention of reaching agreement. Yet there is no evidence that the city council has analysed regulation 18 responses with a view to amending the plan or attempted to reach agreement or find compromises with three of the four district councils on the amount and location of housing development. The plan therefore **fails to meet the duty to cooperate** and in our view the Inspector has no choice but to recommend that the plan is not adopted.

Objection to policy H1 and paragraph 2.8

The amount of housing in paragraph 2.8 is based on the Cambridge Econometrics base-line scenario in the HENA and not on the government's standard methodology. We do not accept that the city council's reasons to justify a departure from the government's standard methodology (set out in document BGP1) constitute the required exceptional circumstances. The full census results are not yet available and the standard methodology, which allows for a 40% increase in housing to allow for affordability concerns is still the Government's mandated approach. Simply building even more homes will not make them genuinely affordable. The high level of commuting into the city is not a reason to depart from the standard methodology – on the contrary commuting has been exacerbated by the council's planning policies that have favoured employment growth and pushed housing provision elsewhere.

We do not accept that Oxford's housing need is for 1322 dwellings a year - an increase 73% above the standard methodology of 762 dwellings a year. It is based on an arbitrary and untested methodology that would result in Oxfordshire's population growing by nearly 27% by 2040, an unrealistically high figure compared to the ONS estimate of a UK increase of less than 5%. It would require high levels of migration into the county either from overseas or elsewhere in the UK. The figure masquerading as housing need is not based on housing need but is a policy choice to pursue employment growth in Oxford and housing growth elsewhere in the county. For these reasons we consider **the plan has not been positively prepared** - the need has not been objectively assessed or informed by agreements with other authorities. The level of increase **is not justified** - it is not a sustainable or an appropriate strategy, and there is no evidence that reasonable alternatives have been properly assessed. Instead, the city council continues to push vastly inflated housing numbers on to the surrounding districts.

As it is beyond the scope of Oxford to provide 1322 homes a year, it will be for the adjoining councils to decide how much of Oxford's unmet needs to provide. The plan therefore **is not effective** as it is not deliverable over the plan period, is not based on effective joint working and cross boundary issues have been ignored. The inflated needs figure in this plan must not be used to pre-empt decisions that are more appropriately made by the adjoining district councils when there will be opportunities for debate at their regulation 18 consultations and local plan inquiries.

The high level of growth is **not consistent with national policy** or the government's pledge to reduce international migration or its levelling up and zero carbon agendas, and would need significant investment in infrastructure at a time of severe financial constraints. It is not compatible with the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision which commits plans to 'good growth' that is sustainable and inclusive. It will not deliver genuinely affordable housing and would be seriously damaging to the environment, landscape and natural resources of the county, including the important landscape setting of Oxford and the integrity of the Green Belt, and be detrimental to the well-being of residents and businesses. The city council should move away from an old-fashioned pursuit of GDP growth to the more socially and environmentally aware 'doughnut economics', developed by Kate Raworth, which aims to ensure that no one lacks life's essentials, and that development does not compromise the planet's ability to support life.

On the number of new homes to be built in Oxford policy H1 makes provision for at least 9,612 over the plan period 2020-2040 (an average of 481 a year). This is too low and **is not positively attempting to provide for Oxford's housing needs** to be met within the city. It **is not justified** or explained. The adopted plan, for example, provides for at least 10,884 new homes to be built in Oxford over the plan period 2016-2036 with an expected delivery of 567 dwellings a year after 2021.

There is already sufficient employment floorspace in Oxford within the planning system to deliver the HENA's 'high' growth development led scenario (BGP6a). Policy E1 will enable even more jobs to be created on category 1 and 2 employment sites through intensification and modernisation and will resist the loss of employment floorspace or jobs from these sites. Furthermore, there are large brownfield and employment sites that could accommodate additional housing including for example on the ARC business park, Oxford business park, Unipart, Botley Road retail area and Osney Mead. It would appear there is no real intention to enable more housing to be built on employment sites. The alternative option of providing more housing within the city on brownfield and employment sites has not been properly assessed. This option would minimise the impacts on landscape, green infrastructure, nature, built heritage and recreation.

The combination of using the high growth forecasts for housing and underestimating potential supply is unsustainable and is **not consistent with national policy** in the National Planning Policy Framework. It will lead to an increase the already large number of people commuting into the city with all the detrimental environmental, social and economic consequences that flow from it. These strategic impacts, which will affect not just the city but the surrounding districts, have not been properly assessed or addressed either within the plan or through cooperation with the surrounding districts.

For these reasons we conclude that the city council has failed in its duty to cooperate positively with consultees, including three of the four adjoining district councils, and has disregarded the consequences for the climate emergency and the people, economy and environment in the county as a whole. The submission plan does not meet the required four

tests of soundness set out in the NPPF - it has not been positively prepared and is not justified, effective or consistent with national policy.

Changes to make the document sound or legally compliant?

Given the failure to cooperate the city council should withdraw the plan and redraft it for proper regulation 18 consultation. If the city council proceeds to an examination, we would recommend the Inspector to reject it on grounds of non-compliance with the duty to cooperate. If the Inspector were not so minded, we would recommend it should be modified as follows:

a) Replace the figure of 1322 in paragraph 2.8 with 762 which is the annual housing need assessed using the standard methodology - not the misleadingly inflated standard methodology figure in some of the HENA tables
b) Increase the housing capacity figure in H1 though a positive re-evaluation of sites
c) Change policy E1 to have a more positive approach to housing development.

Objection to policy E1 and paragraph 3.6

POETS acknowledge and support Oxford's global reputation for education and research, but consider that policy E1 could lead to a further concentration of jobs in the city and is too restrictive in relation to housing development on employment sites. The restrictions are not consistent with the city council's stated to aims of tackling the urgent need for more homes in Oxford, particularly as there is already sufficient employment floorspace within the planning system to deliver the HENA's 'high' growth development led scenario (BGP6a).

It is clear from paragraph 3.6 that the city council's vision for Oxfordshire is to concentrate employment growth in Oxford, develop housing elsewhere and have people travel to work in the city. Policy E1 will enable even more jobs to be created on category 1 and 2 employment sites through intensification and modernisation and will resist the loss of employment floorspace or jobs from these sites. Even on category 3 sites alternative uses will have to meet the rigorous tests in E1e), and policy S1d) focuses new employment on existing sites already in that use. The city council seems to have an inflated opinion of the importance of Oxford in sustaining the economy of the county, and it fails to recognise the dynamism of employment sites elsewhere such as Harwell and Milton Park for example. There is no real intention to enable more housing to be built on employment sites and there is no evidence that alternative strategies have been properly assessed and evaluated.

There are large employment sites that could accommodate additional housing including for example on the ARC business park, Oxford business park, Unipart, Botley Road retail area and Osney Mead. Providing more housing within the city on employment sites would enable more affordable homes to be built and potentially go some way towards reducing the need to commute in the city for work. It would minimise the impacts on landscape, green infrastructure, nature, built heritage and recreation both within and outside the city.

Given the current and likely increase in the imbalance of jobs over economically active residents in Oxford, the submission plan is not sustainable. It will encourage development on greenfield sites outside the city and threaten the Green Belt. The already high levels of commuting into Oxford will worsen as will traffic congestion on the approach roads and within the city itself. Climate change will be exacerbated and spatial inequalities within Oxfordshire and the UK will be increased contrary to government policy. Housing costs in Oxford are likely to increase and workers living outside Oxford will have to bear the time and financial costs of travel.

For these reasons we conclude that the submission plan does not meet the required four tests of soundness set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. **It has not been positively prepared** in that the employment needs have not been objectively assessed or informed by agreements with other authorities and would not achieve sustainable development. **It is not justified:** it is not an appropriate strategy, reasonable alternatives have not been properly assessed and evidence of serious housing need and high levels of commuting have been subverted. **It is not effective:** the city council's strategy is not deliverable, it pushes an unreasonable amount of housing to the surrounding rural districts with no effective joint working and cross boundary strategic matters have been ignored. **It is not consistent with national advice** as it will not deliver sustainable development in accordance with the policies of the NPPF. The city council has disregarded the consequences for the people, economy and environment in the county as a whole.

Changes needed to make the plan sound

Given the failure to cooperate the city council should withdraw the plan and redraft it for proper regulation 18 consultation. If the city council proceeds to an examination, we would recommend the Inspector to reject it on grounds of non-compliance with the duty to cooperate. If the Inspector were not so minded, we would recommend that policy E1 and the supporting text should be fundamentally rewritten to reduce restrictions and more positively enable residential development on employment sites. For the avoidance of doubt, consequential changes should also be made to policy S1.