POETS
Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

POETS' initial response to Oxford Growth Commission's Interim Report

Introduction

1. POETS' (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) Vision is that development in Oxfordshire over the next 20 years should focus on addressing the existential threat of climate change and creating a prosperous economy with decent housing for all. New housing and employment should be based around excellent public transport, cycling and walking provision. Reforms are needed to provide a massive increase in social housing for rent to meet housing need.

2. We consider there are some fundamental flaws in the Growth Commission's Interim Report that will not overcome the barriers to long-term balanced growth and come nowhere near our Vision. Our initial concerns are that

- we welcome the Commission's efforts to secure funding for specific sites, but the serious lack of funding for infrastructure and genuinely affordable homes, which are major barriers to sustainable growth, get scant attention, and few solutions are put forward as to how this is to be resolved long-term
- the major imbalance between employment and housing in and around Oxford looks set to be made worse to 2050, exacerbating already critical transport problems
- the strategy should focus on economic growth that builds on Oxfordshire's strengths and brings benefits for all the community. We would like to see more about the development of local skills and help for areas of significant deprivation. We would support the introduction of a tourist tax
- a dash for growth could worsen congestion and pressure on over-stretched services and damage the natural and historic environment - assets which have made Oxfordshire an attractive place to invest, live and visit. It would be likely to undermine the broader objectives on climate, health, sustainability and inclusion.

The opportunity areas – damaging imbalance of jobs and homes in the Oxford area

3. We support higher housing densities in the opportunity areas but are concerned about the large number of estimated jobs in and near Oxford. Given the already chronic imbalance between jobs and housing in Oxford, the Commission should focus on securing more homes in the opportunity areas, particularly on sites within the city and on the over-generous employment areas within the greenfield housing sites (e.g. Salt Cross and sites in the Vale and South local plan).

4. It is impossible to assess the increase in the amount of development being proposed and what it could mean for the overall amount of development in the county. This needs prompt clarification, including at the very least:

- maps or plans showing the extent of the opportunity areas; and within them
- the amount of development proposed in both outline and detailed planning permissions, and separately in submitted applications pending determination
- allocations in adopted local plans where no planning application has been made
- allocations in emerging local plans, where different from the above, and
- an assessment of any increase above these figures assumed in the Interim Report.

5. We are also concerned about the city council's vague proposal for 40,000 homes in the green belt. It is highly contentious, fraught with problems and would take many years for a properly planned delivery. If it is to be part of the longer-term solution, there must be clarity on how it will be brought forward, otherwise there will be a plethora of speculative applications. As development at Chalgrove and Heyford do not meet the locational requirements in the Interim Report, they should be excluded.

Barriers to balanced growth – a major infrastructure deficit

6. There is only scant acknowledgment that the lack of funding for infrastructure will deter economic growth and efficiency. The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy October 2025 estimates that £9bn is needed to 2050 of which only £1.4 bn has been secured. Further funding from S106, CIL, the Enterprise Zones, TIF, and some ad hoc funding on specific sites will not reduce the gap significantly - with long term consequences for inhibiting economic growth. If the value of land permitted for development was capped at the existing use value plus a small increase, significantly more money would be available for providing infrastructure, genuinely affordable housing and addressing climate change. More work on long-term funding is needed in the final report. Funds raised locally should not be used to help the privatised utility companies put in the upgrades they should have been doing as part of a responsible business plan.

Barriers to balanced growth – congestion, with jam today and more jams tomorrow!

7. There seems to be an implicit assumption that Oxford and Oxfordshire can accommodate massive growth without major investment in game–changing shifts to public transport and active travel. With relatively few additions to the capacities of these transport modes, many of the movements arising from new developments will be car based. Increased traffic and congestion will deter business investment, but expensive road building is both unaffordable and self-defeating. The report does not address the economic effects of further overloading the ring road, the A34 and the A40, or the health and environmental consequences of increased traffic in the city. Planned rail investment is welcome and should be brought forward, but a massive shift to active travel and increases in bus frequency and reliability are essential.

Barriers to balanced growth – the lack of genuinely affordable homes

8. Successive governments have failed to acknowledge that many people simply cannot afford to buy or rent a home on the open market, and they have failed to take bold steps to address it. Public investment in new social housing for rent, secured for the medium or long term, is urgently needed and would bring many wide-ranging benefits. It would boost overall housing numbers, reduce the burden on developers so helping them with viability issues, and by guaranteeing funding it would help unlock sites by reducing risk and cash-flow problems. It would enable cheaper shared ownership homes, lift people out of poverty, give them more money to spend in the local economy, give families the security they need to thrive and educational outcomes would improve. It would help drive inward investment in the economy - expensive housing deters inward investment. It would save billions of pounds of public money on the NHS, social security and housing benefits and the savings would outweigh the costs in the medium term. The Commission should call on government to increase public investment in social housing and must investigate alternative and innovative sources of funding.

Barriers to balanced growth – lack of a strategic plan and the shortage of local authority staff

9. The lack of strategic planning has been a barrier to growth – the local plans of three councils have been seriously delayed by it - and there is an urgent need to complete emerging local plans quickly. The Commission should recommend that in advance of the new strategic authority being formed, the six Oxfordshire local authorities start preparatory work as soon as possible on a draft strategy for Oxfordshire to 2050, perhaps led by the county council. This is needed to guide the amount and location of development in local plans and provide a context for considering the large speculative proposals already being made. It would take account of broader objectives including climate change, and environmental, health, inclusivity and sustainability issues. To accelerate strategic and local plan development and handle major applications, funding is needed for additional permanent staff based locally.

Bringing it together – what POETS are looking for

10. There needs to be a much greater focus in the work of the Commission on demonstrable long-term solutions to deliver its stated aims of 'sustainable and inclusive growth that delivers real benefits and improved quality of life to communities across the county'. Properly planned growth is required to achieve this, and it is crucial that a short-term dash for growth does not worsen prospects in the longer term. We would expect the Final Report to contain much more about the step changes needed to bring about long-term investment in infrastructure and social housing, including innovative measures that could be tested here in Oxfordshire. Issuing targets for growth, identifying more land for development, reducing regulations and limited ad hoc funding will not work in the long-term and risk damaging the very assets that have attracted economic investment in Oxford and Oxfordshire in the past.

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