POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

A Vision for Oxfordshire's Future

This paper sets out a vision that POETS believe should guide future development and change in Oxfordshire.

July 2025

This paper updates a previous vision paper prepared in March 2020. It aims to stimulate discussion about how best to achieve a healthy, sustainable future for the county and will, we hope, help guide the decision makers. The links given in the text provide further reading and evidence in support of the vision.

A summary version of this paper is available here:
www.poetsplanningoxon.org.uk

POETS are a voluntary think tank of planning, environment and transport professionals and academics, providing analysis, commentary and ideas on sustainable transport and planning for Oxfordshire.

We welcome discussion and debate about the vision and ideas in this paper.

Please e-mail any comments to contact.poets@gmail.com

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS) – Vision

1. This vision explores what Oxfordshire should look like in 20 years' time and what principles should underpin our planning for the future. Central to the vision is the need for all plans to respond to the existential threat of climate change. It takes account of the government's objectives for significantly increased housing and economic growth, and changes to local government structures. It seeks to balance social and environmental objectives with the demand for economic prosperity and good quality housing.

2. People want good health, a good income, secure work, fulfilling leisure, dependable public services and affordable housing – as well as a healthy and resilient environment in which to live. Planning, underpinned by a strong democratic mandate, is a key part of the solution, as is development which focuses on quality at least as much as on quantity.

3. We believe that effective land use and transport planning in the public interest is an essential tool for sustainable growth and for achieving our vision. Good planning enables us to use resources efficiently, joining up infrastructure, homes, work and leisure opportunities with huge benefits to society, the environment and the economy – and at its best can deliver beneficial and transformational change. This was recognised in the comprehensive 2020 Raynsford Review of planning in England.

4. The promotion of sustainable development which provides for the "health, safety and wellbeing of individuals" as set out by Raynsford, requires a broader set of objectives than economic growth alone. For example, if the proposed Oxford-Cambridge Corridor* advocated by central government is to fulfil its potential, it must be planned sustainably, with a clear strategic plan.

5. Future development and growth should be set within a clear strategy and spatial framework, with high quality public transport as its focus, attractive, safe and convenient provision for active travel, and measures to suppress private car use. Brownfield land should be used whenever possible. All new housing should be located with ready access to frequent and reliable prioritised public transport, and development which does not meet this criterion should not be permitted.

6. All transport investment and space allocation should be consistent with the policies in the Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, particularly with regard to meeting the targets for modal shift from private car use to walking, cycling and public transport. In addition, interventions to limit car use, such as those in place or proposed in Oxford, should not be undermined by new road capacity which will induce new traffic – a phenomenon recognised by government over 30 years ago.

7. In the rest of this document we set out an approach which we believe can lead to a radically better future for the county, together with our rationale for the vision. Here is our vision of life in the county in 2045:

* Previously the Oxford-Cambridge Arc

VISION

Climate. All policies, funding and actions are set in the context of the climate emergency and are directed towards mitigating and adapting to climate change as a central focus. Insulation and retrofitting are widespread. All new buildings are zero carbon and highly water-efficient.

Housing. Everyone, in all communities, has access to a safe, secure, decent and genuinely affordable home that meets their needs. New housing is focused on affordable and social housing that lower paid and key workers can afford.

Economy. The economy continues to prosper to the benefit of all. Jobs are secure and pay fairly, relative to the local cost of living. There is a range of jobs, not just in education, research and development (reflecting Oxfordshire's strengths), but also in other sectors (care, agriculture etc.).

Health. Mental and physical well-being for all are key objectives. There are ample opportunities for healthy lifestyles, including safe and convenient walking or cycling. Clean air is assured by all policies.

Equity. Social justice is an overriding principle: quality of life is high and people's life expectancy is not determined by family background or where they were born or live. There are opportunities for everyone to flourish, with good education, training and job prospects.

Food security. The best and most versatile agricultural land is protected from development to help ensure food security for the nation.

Biodiversity. Habitat condition is monitored, protected and enhanced as appropriate to the land's nature conservation value. Rewilding projects are undertaken and all new development demonstrates effectively that it has resulted in biodiversity net gain.

Electricity. Local generation from renewables is widespread and includes many community schemes. All new buildings, especially large warehouses and industrial buildings, incorporate photovoltaic panels on their roofs. New housing also incorporates heat pumps.

Water. There is excellent sewerage capacity serving all parts of the county, and water quality is much improved. Per capita clean water consumption and leaks from the existing water supply network have been significantly reduced and flooding has been alleviated by good catchment management and upstream measures to slow the flow. New development incorporates water-efficiency features.

Transport. Proposals for increased road capacity have been abandoned. Travel need and demand is reduced, best use is made of well-maintained existing infrastructure, with walking, cycling and public transport use prioritised, making private vehicle use less convenient. Car ownership has continued to fall significantly and more residents are members of car clubs. Investment and the allocation of road space is redirected to improved pedestrian, cycling and public transport provision. Evidence shows that this is generally more cost effective than increasing road capacity and provides better access for all.

New development is located to respect and enhance surrounding townscape or landscape character. It avoids sprawl, provides social infrastructure up front, is based on the use of sustainable travel modes, and incorporates sustainable drainage and flood protection measures.

High quality design is a guiding objective for both individual buildings and urban spaces.

Access. There is convenient access for everyone to the goods and services that people need locally, as well as to high quality local greenspaces and sports areas. Community ownership of land and other assets is a key priority.

Democracy. Plans for development and change are considered and approved by democratically elected, clearly accountable representatives. Genuine citizen involvement in decision making is a key policy priority.

How can our vision be achieved?

8. When considering growth and land use change, we need to ask why, and for whom? Research increasingly shows that equality is better for everyone; and that we need reform of the way land is owned and controlled.

9. As the Stern Review demonstrated, while the costs of stabilising the climate are significant, they are manageable; delay would be dangerous and much more costly. More recently, economists such as Professor Sir Dieter Helm have argued that the existing approach to financing action to tackle climate change should change. In his opinion, it should be viewed as an operating cost rather than an investment; in other words, the climate should be seen as an asset, and current rather than capital spending should be used to make sure it does not depreciate. He states: "You don't invest in fixing the holes in the road. That's a current operating cost. And I actually believe quite radically, you don't invest in fixing the climate. You make sure it doesn't depreciate".

10. We recognise the importance of economic development, which needs to be balanced with social and environmental objectives, and the benefits of growth shared more equally. An example of this happened in the post-war period when a very damaged and broken nation nonetheless made massive investments for the public good, including the establishment of the NHS, social housing, the planning system, and National Parks and access to the countryside.

11. There is a lack of consistency in the approach to infrastructure investment. There is strong evidence of the high economic cost of poor housing particularly to the NHS, in addition to the human misery it represents. In the past (e.g. in the 1960s) public investment in social housing proved very effective in growing the country's housing stock; if such housing were now to be classed as critical national infrastructure in the same way as roads and energy networks, it would help to reduce these costs, and provide benefits to a large number of people. In contrast, there are some elements of infrastructure investment which provide financial benefits primarily to private companies and their shareholders; while these companies employ very effective lobbyists, the public benefits of such investment are far more limited.

12. Nature must be seen as one of our greatest assets. According to robust recent research by the United Nations Development Programme, a large majority of people want strong action on climate change, and are also prepared to pay for it. Greater investment in nature and climate recovery also offers great scope for new businesses and jobs, potentially making excellent use of Oxfordshire's research and technological skills.

13. Importantly, a return to strong, strategic, spatial planning, overseen by unitary local government could help to achieve this vision. If the Growth Commission is to meet its remit, it will wish to make best use of the synergies that already exist within Oxfordshire. For example, there are strong links between University research in Oxford and developments at Harwell, or between Oxford and the motorsport clusters based particularly around Bicester and in the north of the county. For environmental

protection, mitigating flooding problems in Oxford and elsewhere is heavily dependent on catchment management upstream e.g. in the Evenlode. For these reasons, of the alternatives currently being considered for local government reorganisation, an Oxfordshire-based unitary represents the most sensible option. Oxfordshire already operates largely as a city region, and it makes little sense to separate Oxford from its hinterland.

14. This approach could help in making the best land use decisions, ensuring that the right development occurs in the right place, supported by solid evidence. We would also welcome a greater emphasis on vision-led planning that integrates the planning of development and transport infrastructure, with a view to reducing dependence on the private car.

15. Clear, principled national and local leadership will be required if this vision is to be achieved, but the consequences of not taking action will be much more expensive and damaging in the long run. There are many ways in which big improvements can be made, starting today. Here are some practical planning and transport measures that could be taken forward now. Some require action by central government, for example through new legislation, but others could be actioned locally, for example in emerging local plans.

ACHIEVING THE VISION

Establish clear, strategic guidance for development in Oxfordshire ensuring that addressing the climate emergency is central. This would empower local government to identify the best locations in line with strict criteria for genuinely sustainable development and end the reliance on the 'call for sites' approach to local plan making.

Ensure that planning authorities have the resources they need. The dire under-capacity caused by austerity is arguably one of the greatest obstacles to positive development and change.

Provide genuinely, permanently affordable homes for social rent that are not subject to the right to buy e.g. using Community Land Trusts, council housing, Registered Social Landlords and other delivery mechanisms. These should also be high quality, energy efficient homes that counter deprivation and bring savings in housing benefit and NHS costs.

Abolish hope value and strengthen compulsory purchase powers and land value capture mechanisms, allowing councils to assemble and buy land at existing value and secure land value uplifts to help fund council and other social housing, infrastructure and public services.

Investigate other measures to reduce house price inflation, for example by strengthening local and national tax regulations to suppress housing demand from investors, and stopping the sale of council houses and other social rented properties. Bring unoccupied housing back into use e.g. through planning controls on short term lets and second homes, and permanent residency requirements on new housing.

In Oxford, prioritise the provision of new homes over new jobs, as the city already has significantly more jobs than residents of working age.

In the Oxford Green Belt, ensure the national importance of Oxford's character and landscape setting, recognised by governments of all political complexions for over 70 years, is protected, taking account of revised government guidelines about development in the green belt and designating areas of grey belt. The Green Belt should also provide greater opportunities for countryside recreation for the local population, as well as biodiversity protection and enhancement.

Ensure new development protects attractive/valuable countryside, biodiversity and the historic character of towns and villages. Wherever possible, it should be **restricted to brownfield sites** in sustainable locations, well served by walking, cycling and public transport.

Ensure the big housebuilders deliver on outstanding permissions and promises and impose a strict time limit on planning permissions. Reform viability assessments, holding developers to their original promises, particularly for the provision of social and affordable homes.

Ensure businesses and institutions generating jobs take specific measures to create excellent opportunities for the people of Oxfordshire, including through community wealth building actions which help to direct some of the generated wealth back into the local economy and community.

Implement fully the Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan's excellent policies on low carbon, safe and healthy travel. In particular, integrate land use and transport planning so that houses are built where they have good access to all the necessary facilities, without reliance on the private car.

Ensure all new development and supporting infrastructure are zero carbon in construction and operation. Affected communities should benefit from major development e.g. through local employment and training, and provision of active travel, green spaces and other environmental enhancements.

Maintain and make best use of existing infrastructure, including housing, roads, railways, water supply and sewerage, to optimise the condition and capacity of these important assets.

Protect and enhance green spaces. Conserve, interconnect and increase green spaces in and around settlements. Such 'green lungs' benefit human health, nature and the character and settings of homes and towns. Give key green spaces Local Green Space Designation.

Restore floodplains, which are the key to flood protection as winters become warmer and wetter and extreme weather events increase. Protect floodplain land from development rather than building over it.

Rationale

Oxfordshire today

16. Oxfordshire is a special county. At its heart is a city that people come from the world over to visit and to study in, with an internationally renowned university, unmatched architecture and a celebrated landscape setting. The county boasts three National Landscapes (the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, and the North Wessex Downs) as well as many other attractive landscapes and valued habitats.

17. Oxfordshire has a successful economy, based both on its strengths as a centre of learning and research and on the high quality of its environment. However, changes in recent years increasingly threaten environment and quality of life in Oxfordshire, whilst not addressing key issues:

- Along with the rest of the world, the county faces a climate and nature emergency. This is exacerbated by a strong focus on growth and consumption rather than on shared prosperity, health, safety and wellbeing. Although the County Council tops the Council Climate Action Scorecards there is much to do, particularly in transport, where policy is not matched by action in either money or the space allocated to sustainable travel.

- Despite being one of the wealthiest counties in the country, locally there are high levels of inequality, homelessness, lack of affordable housing and poor quality housing, as well as deprived areas with low life expectancy.

- There is a great and growing imbalance between the amount of employment in Oxfordshire (especially in the city) and the number of homes, adding to transport demand, commuting and congestion. The siting of many new developments encourages car dependence.

- Transport is Oxfordshire's largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, with most emissions coming from road vehicles. Emissions also affect air quality, deter people from walking and cycling, and limit children's independence. Poor air quality and inactive lifestyles impose huge costs on the NHS.

- New road building consumes a disproportionate share of transport spending but actually generates more traffic and thus is ultimately counter-productive; while relatively little investment is made in public transport, active travel or road maintenance, which cost much less and generally provide far better returns on investment.

- The cumulative loss of greenspace and countryside to development has adverse impacts on nature and recreation as well as serious health and mental health implications – issues that are likely to worsen as a result of higher housing targets recently set by central government.

- Existing infrastructure, including water, sewerage, schools, health facilities, roads, pavements and cycle paths, is often crumbling and some new developments are inadequately served by these vital community facilities.

- Large infrastructure projects, including the proposed Oxford-Cambridge Corridor, the Oxford flood alleviation scheme, the South East strategic reservoir and the Botley West solar farm, will have major environmental impacts.

Challenges

18. Economic growth, as measured by GDP, will not adequately address these issues, and indeed may make many problems worse:

- Reliance on GDP growth as the main tool and measure of success encourages the use of fossil fuels and natural resources and hence increases carbon emissions. On its own, it is a poor measure of quality of life and of many of the things that people value, such as neighbourhood, community, nature and health.

- The evidence is clear that the greatest economic benefit will come from investment in measures to tackle the climate crisis now not later, when the cost will be greater. As set out in the vision, this should be the first priority. Such measures may include energy efficiency, retrofitting and public transport.

- The lack of social housing is the biggest cause of the housing shortage. While more homes are definitely needed, the focus should be on providing genuinely affordable homes with good access to local services by public transport, cycling or walking. Executive homes in villages only accessible by car will not help to meet these needs. Development on brownfield land and close to employment should be prioritised.

- The government appears to rely on private housebuilders to meet housing targets and improve affordability. This simply will not work. There are already around a million unimplemented planning permissions nationally; and experience has shown that the volume builders will not dent profits by building at rates that will bring house prices down.

- Nor will the volume housebuilders provide zero carbon homes, adequate community infrastructure, green spaces or public transport without stronger government intervention and greater public investment, as has taken place at key points in the past.

- The economy of the south-east should not be overheated by major projects at the expense of other parts of the country. Moreover, the county's best landscapes, habitats and historic environment features need to be identified and protected – or there is a risk of losing what is special about Oxfordshire for both economy and environment.

- Planning and environmental regulations remain vitally important for the efficient use of land and buildings in the public interest, and for protecting valuable environmental assets. Key principles such as democratic input to local and national planning decisions also need to be upheld, underpinned with much improved resourcing of public sector planning departments.