POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

A Vision for Oxfordshire's Future

Summary

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

July 2025

This summary vision 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 full 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) – Summary 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 this is the need for all plans to respond to the existential threat of climate change. The vision 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. Land use and transport planning in the public interest, underpinned by a strong democratic mandate, is essential for joining up infrastructure, homes, work and leisure opportunities. At its best it can deliver transformational change with huge benefits to society, the environment and the economy, helping address climate change and promote sustainable development. Achieving 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.

3. Genuinely beneficial development must be set within a clear strategy and spatial framework, with ready access to frequent and reliable, prioritised 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. Development which does not meet these requirements should not be permitted.

4. In the rest of this document we set out an approach which we believe can lead to a radically better future for the county.

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?

5. Research increasingly shows that equality is better for everyone; and that we need reform of the way land is owned and controlled. Likewise, the importance of economic development needs to be balanced with social and environmental objectives, with the benefits of growth shared more equally.

6. As the Stern Review demonstrated, delaying tackling climate change is much more costly. Professor Sir Dieter Helm has argued that the approach to financing action to tackle climate change should be viewed as an operating cost rather than an investment, with the climate seen as an asset that should not be allowed to depreciate.

7. Much greater public investment in long term infrastructure would help tackle climate change and yield wider social and environmental benefits, including to the NHS. There is strong evidence of the high economic cost of poor housing which, if it were to be classed as critical national infrastructure in the same way as roads and energy networks, it would help reduce costs and human misery.

8. Nature must be seen as one of our greatest assets. Greater investment in nature and climate recovery offers great scope for new businesses and jobs, potentially using Oxfordshire's research and technological skills.

9. Strong, strategic, spatial planning, overseen by a unitary authority could help achieve this vision. If the Growth Commission is to meet its remit it will wish to make best use of the synergies and interdependencies within Oxfordshire. An Oxfordshire-based unitary represents the most sensible option of those under consideration. Oxfordshire operates largely as a city region, and it makes little sense to separate it from its hinterland.

10. A unitary Oxfordshire could help in making the best land use decisions, ensuring that the right development occurs in the right place. It would also support a greater emphasis on vision-led planning, integrating planning of development and transport infrastructure, reducing dependence on the private car.

11. Clear, principled national and local leadership is required to take forward planning and transport solutions now. Some require action by central government but others could be actioned locally 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.