

**To:** Scrutiny

**Title of report:** Oxfordshire Plan 2050: Summary of Consultation

**Date:** 24 January 2022

**Report of** Philip Wadsworth – Programme Lead of the Oxfordshire Plan

**Executive summary and purpose:**

*This report provides an update on the preparation of the Oxfordshire Plan, including a summary of the comments received during the recent consultation.*

*Once adopted, the Oxfordshire Plan will provide a high-level spatial framework to shape the future planning of the county up to 2050 and will sit alongside Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans.*

## 1 Introduction

1.1 This report provides an update on the preparation of the Oxfordshire Plan, and outlines the proposed roadmap covering the next stages of the Oxfordshire Plan preparation process, from engagement through to independent examination and adoption. It covers:

- an update on the progress of the plan;
- a summary of key feedback from the last round of public consultation (regulation 18, part 2);
- the scope of the plan, in light of the consultation and changes to national planning policy and legislation;
- the next steps and associated risks to the timely delivery of the plan; and
- an update on the revised consultation arrangements in the Statement of Community Involvement.

1.2 The Oxfordshire Plan is a joint statutory spatial plan and covers the authorities of Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. These authorities have made a commitment as part of the housing and growth deal agreement to prepare the Oxfordshire Plan on a joint basis to guide the future planning and development of the county up to 2050. Once adopted, it will form part of the development plan of each authority and will be an important material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

1.3 Since July 2021, much progress has been made on the preparation of the Oxfordshire Plan, including a further round of public consultation (regulation 18, part 2) and the gathering of supporting evidence.

1.3 The recent public consultation (July–October 2021) generated significant interest from a wide range of individuals and organisations.

- We received a total of 3723 individual responses to the consultation, from around 422 individuals and organisations, including statutory consultees, district councils, neighbouring authorities, town

and parish councils, major employers, infrastructure providers, developers, landowners and government agencies.

- We received a high number of responses in relation to the spatial options (homes and employment) and the following policy themes: low carbon and renewable energy, sustainable transport and movement, biodiversity net gain, nature recovery and sustainable design and construction.
- The consultation requested suggestions ('call for ideas') on which broad locations should be considered within the plan, such as large-scale housing or employment sites, infrastructure projects and strategic environmental designations. We received a total of 77 new site submissions, including 59 housing and mixed-use sites and 11 employment sites.
- We used an array of digital tools such as social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and other platforms (e.g. media adverts and a dedicated consultation web site) to publicise the consultation and provide links to relevant documentation. All age groups were represented in the consultation responses from aged 18 and above (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65 plus).
- In response to the covid-19 pandemic, we held a series of online events including business engagement and online webinars to engage with specific groups (e.g. young people) and organisations during the consultation. The virtual webinars secured a good turnout: 230 participants attended 4 x public events and 89 participants attended 2 x stakeholder events, focused on the development sector and the environment.

1.4 The key points raised in the regulation 18 (part 2) public consultation are highlighted below.

- The Oxfordshire Plan received a high level of support in the consultation and generally positive feedback on the bold and ambitious strategic vision and the supporting objectives.
- Our approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation has widespread support.
- General agreement that more affordable homes are needed across Oxfordshire.
- Further detail is needed on the scope and content of the policies as they evolve from options.
- Flexibility in the policies is needed due to the length of the plan period
- Strong appetite to undertake a comprehensive review of the Oxford Green Belt
- Use of design and sustainability principles and policy thresholds (e.g. health impact assessments and air quality assessments) are largely welcomed.
- Development and the strategy should encourage sustainable and active travel and consider new technologies.
- Further evidence is needed to support policies and demonstration they are deliverable.
- Concern over the viability of some policy requirements (e.g. biodiversity net gain and sustainable design).
- Consistency with the National Planning Policy Framework (e.g. brownfield first approach)
- Avoidance of duplication, repetition and use of jargon, with clearer and more concise policies
- Uncertainty over the future role of the joint plan in view of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework.
- Clarification on how the spatial options will deliver against the vision and objectives.
- Future growth requirements must be balanced against environmental objectives
- Growth need scenarios: In general, business-as-usual and standard method approaches are not well supported<sup>1</sup>. Transformational growth received the highest number of positive responses (especially from developers and landowners) but additional, alternative scenarios (i.e. lower than the standard method) threshold also received wide support, especially from environmental and amenity groups.
- Spatial options: Large settlements and existing growth locations (including transport corridors and areas of employment) are generally supported, subject to caveats.
- Some consultees want more say on the next iteration of the plan - expressed general concern about jumping to regulation 19 (the formal stage of plan preparation) without having the opportunity to consider the preferred strategy, policies and reasonable alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> The growth scenarios are set out in the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA), based on estimates of future housing need in Oxfordshire (although these are not binding housing requirements – as explained in paragraph 3.1).

1.5 For a more detailed breakdown of the consultation results, please read the regulation 18 (part 2) consultation report at appendix 1 (see attached). The consultation report provides a summary of the responses to the public consultation, which will inform the next stages of the plan process. An explanation of how the views of people and organisations have informed the development of the plan will be provided at the next preparation stage, in the form of an updated consultation report.

## 2 Scope and purpose of the Oxfordshire Plan

2.1 The Oxfordshire Plan will provide a positive and high-level planning framework to support the delivery of new homes, economic development and associated infrastructure across Oxfordshire, with a bold vision to confront our climate crisis, build a fairer and more prosperous economy, foster more thriving and accessible neighbourhoods, and support a truly green recovery that protects the future of our wildlife and environment up to 2050.

2.2 The Oxfordshire Plan will build on the Future Oxfordshire Partnership's strategic vision (further details are provided at <https://futureoxfordshirepartnership.org>) and the objectives of other relevant plans and strategies at the county level, including the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy, Oxfordshire Industrial Strategy and Oxfordshire Transport and Connectivity Plan. A flow diagram summarising the relationship between the Oxfordshire Plan and other relevant plans and strategies, such as Local Plans, is attached at appendix 3 in the draft Statement of Community Involvement.

2.3 The Oxfordshire Plan will, once adopted, provide the policy framework up to 2050 to guide and inform the preparation of the Local Plan reviews in the city of Oxford and each of the four districts.

2.4 Following the regulation 18 (part 2) consultation, the scope and content of the Oxfordshire Plan will need to be updated to take account of:

- new policy requirements (including affordable housing definitions/thresholds, phased delivery of large-scale sites and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures) set out in the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF);
- changes to legislation, including permitted development rights and the biodiversity net gain requirement set out in the Environment Act (which received royal assent in November 2021);
- Natural England's new national framework of green infrastructure standards, delivering a commitment in the government's 25-year Environment Plan<sup>3</sup>; and
- feedback from the regulation 18 (part 2) consultation (including cross-boundary matters identified through the duty to cooperate<sup>4</sup>).

2.5 As a minimum, the Oxfordshire Plan will, along with city and district Local Plans, need to cover the following strategic priorities, as set out in paragraphs 17-23 of the NPPF and relevant legislation.

- Climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Overall pattern and scale of development, including broad locations (illustrated on a key diagram) and/or sites.
- Overall housing requirement (including contribution towards affordable housing) and apportionment to the city and districts up to 2050, tied to the delivery of strategic infrastructure and services.
- Overall employment requirement and jobs growth target up to 2050.
- Strategic infrastructure priorities, addressing cross-boundary issues identified through the duty to cooperate (transport, telecoms, water, green infrastructure and flood risk).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk>

<sup>4</sup> The duty to cooperate is a legal test that requires cooperation between the six Oxfordshire authorities and other public bodies to maximise the effectiveness of the strategic policies in the Oxfordshire Plan.

- Conservation and enhancement of the built environment and townscape, including international and national designated heritage assets and their settings.
- Conservation and enhancement of the natural environment and landscape, including European (e.g. Special Areas of Conservation) and national designations (e.g. Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Sites of Special Scientific Interest).

2.6 The Oxfordshire Plan will set out strategic policies to address county-wide priorities, especially where cross-boundary matters need to be addressed across more than two administrative areas, such as the delivery of strategic infrastructure. Specifically, it will include:

- a portrait of Oxfordshire and the issues and challenges it faces;
- a shared vision of how the county will grow and develop over the period to 2050;
- a clear strategy setting out how and where new development and investment opportunities will be distributed in broad terms, including Oxfordshire's overall housing and employment requirements and how it will be apportioned to the city and districts;
- theme-based policies to guide the determination of planning applications and the preparation of Local Plan reviews; and
- a delivery and implementation framework, setting out review triggers, monitoring targets, strategic infrastructure priorities and delivery mechanisms.

2.7 Currently, the emerging Oxfordshire Plan has a total of 32 policy areas<sup>5</sup>. It is intended that the next iteration of the plan will contain fewer policy areas and use visual aids (e.g. diagrams and maps) to make it more user friendly and accessible to a broader audience.

### **Relationship between the Oxfordshire Plan and Local Plan reviews**

2.8 The Oxfordshire Plan will help provide the strategic direction within which city and district Local Plans are prepared. In this context, the Oxfordshire Plan will outline what it expects Local Plans to cover, in terms of broad scope and content, so that the city and districts are clear about how to ensure they align with and support the Oxfordshire Plan<sup>6</sup>.

2.9 Oxfordshire authorities have been working together to address cross-boundary matters in line with the duty to cooperate (as per section 33A of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) and ensure that Local Plan reviews can be prepared alongside the Oxfordshire Plan through a mutually supportive process.

2.10 The Oxfordshire Plan will set out high-level requirements (e.g. biodiversity net gain, sustainable design and construction and water efficiency standards) to inform future planning decisions on a county-wide basis, while leaving the detail to be set out in Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans. Strategic policies will also be developed (including the application of health impact assessments, air quality impact assessments, natural capital and ecosystem networks and blue-green infrastructure standards) to achieve a consistent approach across Oxfordshire.

## **3 Next steps**

3.1 As outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework, the next stages of the Oxfordshire Plan process will involve<sup>7</sup>:

- establishing the overall housing and employment need figure (taking account of the results of public consultation responses and evidence) over the period to 2050;

<sup>5</sup> <https://oxfordshireplan.org>

<sup>6</sup> Strategic matters are not exclusive to the Oxfordshire Plan (as explained in the National Planning Policy Framework) and will also be a consideration (either jointly or individually) of Local Plan reviews.

<sup>7</sup> See paragraphs 61, 66, 73 and 74 of the NPPF

- identifying strategic locations required to help meet Oxfordshire’s future housing needs, taking account of supply side issues, including:
  - land availability (e.g. prioritising the reuse of brownfield land);
  - environmental constraints (e.g. flood risk, air quality, climate change, heritage and ecological designations etc);
  - capacity of settlements to accommodate change; and
  - cross-boundary issues (e.g. strategic infrastructure);
- translating the need into an overall requirement (including a requirement for affordable housing) and setting out the requirement for each city/district; and
- translating the emerging policy approaches identified in the regulation 18 (part 2) consultation into policy, in the light of viability testing and other technical evidence.

3.2 A detailed analysis of the consultation responses (as summarised in the Regulation Part 2 Consultation Report at appendix 1) is also underway to inform future actions and the next steps of the preparation process.

3.3 Officers are currently reviewing the work programme and timeline for the Oxfordshire Plan in the context of the recent consultation and the responses made. This work also includes considering the inter-relationships between the Oxfordshire Plan and Local Plan reviews, and we aim to conclude that review soon. That detail must be worked through to help inform the next stages of the process including our timetable, and we will engage with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities when that work is complete.

## **4 Legal implications**

4.1 The Oxfordshire Plan must be prepared in accordance with the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and Local Development Scheme (LDS)<sup>8</sup>. It must also meet the requirements of the duty to cooperate set out in the Localism Act (2011) and the tests of soundness set out in the NPPF. Failure to demonstrate compliance with the requirements set out in the legislation would render the plan incapable of adoption.

4.2 The SCI must be kept up-to-date and now needs to be updated to reflect the recent lifting of the coronavirus restrictions and progress on the plan to date. Subject to the approval of the five Oxfordshire cabinets, the updated SCI (as drafted in appendix 2) will be formally adopted and made publicly available on the Oxfordshire Plan website.

4.3 The Local Development Scheme will need to be updated following completion of the work programme review referred to above.

4.4 Some of the key risks associated with the preparation of the Oxfordshire Plan have been updated in the light of the recent regulation 18 (part 2) consultation (see appendix 3).

## **5 Financial implications**

5.1 The work programme review is assessing progress against the existing budget and will identify any financial implications from changes to the work programme and timeline.

5.2 The next stages of the preparation process may incur additional costs to the overall plan budget, in respect of publicity, marketing, retention and extension of existing contracts, consolidation of web-based information, printing and commissioning of consultants to produce interim reports prior to regulation 19. However, efficiency savings can be achieved through the preparation of shared evidence, in-house technical studies, twin-tracked consultations and more efficient use of staff resources and expertise.

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<sup>8</sup> Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004

5.3 Wherever possible, costs associated with the preparation of joint evidence should be shared equally between city and district councils where it feeds into the preparation of Oxfordshire Plan and Local Plan reviews and any other adopted plans (e.g. Oxfordshire Waste and Minerals Plan).

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Date: 24/01/2021