

Response to Oxfordshire 2050 consultation

Introductory comments

It could be argued when reading the plan that housing figures and economic growth targets have been decided on and signed up to by the Oxfordshire councils without transparent consideration of the sustainability of these targets nor the assumptions that underlie the targets themselves and how well they address the needs they are based on. For example, economic growth creates a greater need for housing so more and more is needed. In addition, economic growth and more housing will not be enough to solve the housing crisis in Oxfordshire, which is largely an affordability crisis.

When understood in this light, Oxfordshire 2050 appears to be both a delivery plan to achieve the targets and a plan to mitigate the effects of seeking to achieve them. Therefore, the core intent of the plan should be made clearer. It may well be trying to make sustainable the potentially unsustainable or make the unsustainable less unsustainable. Let's hope the targets that have been set are not ultimately unattainable without causing damage to the place that is Oxfordshire.

The potential of Oxfordshire 2050 is clear. It could be a planning document that makes a decision on what levels of development can be accommodated in Oxfordshire sustainably, based on a spatial understanding of Oxfordshire. The plan could then also consider creatively and progressively the scope it has to address these needs through housing and infrastructure and, where need cannot be met through more houses and more economic growth, explore how these needs can be met in other ways. Currently the approach seems to be quite narrow in its options for meeting need and using the potential of such a plan.

Sustainable growth?

New housing is important and economic growth is necessary. Both provide great opportunities to improve people's lives and Oxfordshire as a whole. But there is a balance that needs to be carefully struck. Too much economic growth can exacerbate existing issues to a point where they become worse, not better, and which harm Oxfordshire and its residents in the longer term. Too many houses can cause the degradation of our natural and historic environment and add to climate change (since a huge proportion of our emissions comes from new development) without actually improving the housing situation. More houses do not mean better affordability, it will not necessarily solve a housing crisis and the impacts this is having on the residents, businesses, and public organisations vital to Oxfordshire. But good planning and cross-discipline working can solve the housing crisis and result in sustainable economic growth that benefits Oxfordshire and beyond. This should be the focus of Oxfordshire 2050.

However, the vision of the plan already feels decided – more houses and as much economic growth as possible. The plan appears to be economic growth led rather than led by the sustainability of

place: economic growth is an emergent property of a successful place and sustainable places are created within the limits of sustainability. The achievement of sustainable growth requires meaningful engagement, iterative review and critical reflection, something the timeline of Oxfordshire 2050 does not lend itself to.

Strengthening the vision of Oxfordshire 2050 – more vision please!

The vision is attempting to be really positive, though perhaps it is not visionary enough. We have recently heard that we have 12 years to drastically reduce our carbon emissions to avoid high risk scenarios. The extent to which the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 can meet its vision and even the relevance of the vision itself is dependent on what level of global warming occurs (e.g. 1.5 degrees, 2 degrees, 3 degrees). The underlying philosophy of the plan does not create a resilient Oxfordshire, rather it ties Oxfordshire into an economic model (economic growth led planning) that may well not be fit for purpose by 2050.

So how about an aspiration for 100,000 net carbon neutral homes? Or a vision that in 2050, transport will be low carbon/ zero carbon. How about a net increase in woodland areas or in soil quality? Or that Oxford will remain a welcoming place for a wide range of people and reverse the emerging reality of it being a very problematic place to live for people on lower incomes.

What about the future of work and where we work? What about re-thinking employment infrastructure - instead of building roads so people can travel to work for hours on end, build co-working workspaces with fast internet access in the towns and larger villages. What about work hubs, reducing the need to commute as far to work? What about a car free Oxford?

Strengthening the vision of Oxfordshire 2050 – ensuring placemaking is a practice and not just theory

The creation of healthy, sustainable communities that are connected and affordable is central to the vision. This is to be strongly supported.

CFO are placemaking specialists. We set out our principles in our [Placemaking Charter](#). Development is not just about houses, and infrastructure does not just mean roads, power and water. It also means social infrastructure. Placemaking means creating thriving, healthy and socially active communities, designed and led by the unique characteristics of people and place. It balances current and future needs in the ongoing creation of welcoming, socially strong places to live, work and play.

We believe Oxfordshire 2050 is an opportunity to strategically embed these principles as fundamental tenets of planning.

However, theory is only as good as its practice and we would like to see a stronger emphasis on the changes required from Local Authorities, developers, communities etc. to allow the theory to practically flourish.

We cannot expect thriving new communities to simply 'emerge'. Placemaking means a commitment by developers, local authorities and others to fund community development support as well as physical infrastructure.

Research strongly endorses the value of having a community development worker available at an early stage in a new development to kick start the process of bringing people together, developing new activities and putting in place the building blocks of a strong community. Lessons from new settlements in the UK over the past 50 years show that a lack of social infrastructure to support new residents when they arrive slows the process of building a locality-based community and can create long-term problems for the social and economic well-being and opportunities of new arrivals.

Strengthening the vision of Oxfordshire 2050 – the importance of the natural environment

There should be more about the natural environment in the vision, it is mentioned as being valued and conserved which is to be welcomed. But, unlike the community/social and economic elements of the vision, it does not take up as much space in the vision as it should, nor is there an aspiration for its improvement.

The natural environment is crucial, not just intrinsically, aesthetically or as part of our heritage but in terms of its impacts on human well-being and health and our ability to adapt, mitigate and be resilient to things like climate change. It deserves more prominence in the vision. Soil, habitats, biodiversity, high grade agricultural land etc. - all of these things provide resilience and are vital to a thriving Oxfordshire in the future and in a changing world.

Strengthening the vision of Oxfordshire 2050 – the role of culture in well-being

Culture is not mentioned at all in the vision. It should be, since it is also crucial to human well-being and thriving as well as to the economy of Oxfordshire. Accessible cultural infrastructure needs to be protected and enhanced so that residents of Oxfordshire can be involved in the arts and in the creation of culture. At the moment, cultural infrastructure is being lost - the vision should be that it will be thriving in 2050. Oxfordshire maintains a thriving arts and music scene, yet this is threatened by the loss of important venues and facilities. Oxfordshire has a thriving cultural economy and a long history of supporting and welcoming up and coming artists and creators. This should be encouraged.

Reducing inequality and improving housing affordability - more aspiration and creativity in the solutions

A wide range of secure and good quality housing options are within reach for all: it is very pleasing to see this in the vision and to see mention of reducing inequality in the foreword of the document.

Mixed communities are also vital for the thriving of the local economy, schools, hospitals, and local businesses. Parts of Oxfordshire, particularly Oxford, are under the threat of gentrification due to increasingly high rents and house prices. Even much of the affordable housing being built is still unaffordable to many people. This is very problematic for small businesses, schools, the NHS etc. not to mention the people who cannot afford housing.

Therefore, we would suggest rewording to something like: *a wide range of secure and good quality housing options, that are affordable for all, will ensure Oxfordshire retains a mixed community.*

We would also strongly encourage Oxfordshire 2050 to give prominence to community-led housing. CLH is a viable housing option, helps tackle the affordability crisis and provides multiple additional social, economic and environmental benefits.

Community land trusts, co-ops, Rural Exception Sites, co-housing, self-build, collective self-build are forms of community-led housing. CFO and Oxfordshire Community Land Trust have set up a service to support the delivery of CLH: [Collaborative Housing](#). We recently undertook [research](#) for Oxford City Council, which showed that:

- community-led housing is feasible in this housing market
- community-led housing has significant advantages across a range of societal goals relating to affordable housing, skills, neighbourliness, health and well-being
- community-led housing is unlikely to deliver large scale but can be part of the mix of solutions to deliver more homes.

In addition, Community-led Housing is also a means to deliver multiple other aims of Oxfordshire 2050, particularly in relation to placemaking and well-being:

- Reduced loneliness and higher well-being: community-led housing can create living environments where people are in frequent contact and “look out for each other” (Older Women’s Co-Housing, <http://www.owch.org.uk>)
- Community led housing schemes focus on keeping people well, living healthy, happy lives in their own communities, rather than in need of expensive, institution-based treatment and care. (*Powerful Communities, Strong Economies, Locality*)
- Cohousing may reduce, or offset, the need for residential care due to enabling active, independent ageing throughout life-stages. Downsizers have the option of remaining in their existing homes (*HAPPI, 2009*)
- Cohousing for older people has advantages, such as age-friendly living environments, that help people self-care for longer and therefore avoid traditional kinds of care and support (*Riseborough, 2013*)
- CLH housing schemes can retain resources within the local economy. Public and private sector spending is retained in the area and the leakage of money is reduced. Wealth created locally is multiplied through the use of local supply chains and local labour (*The Money Trail, New Economics Foundation, 2002*)
- Benefits for individuals involved in developing and managing the housing: community-led approaches help many develop skills helping them into employment (*Commission on Co-operative and Mutual Housing, 2009*)
- Community-led organisations tend to increase local employment and increase the business of local traders and services (*Leeds Empties: Social Impact and Social Value Evaluation Report for 2014-15, Real-Improvement 2015, and Commission on Co-operative and Mutual Housing Report, 2009*)
- CLH schemes have been shown to engage more readily with the low carbon agenda (*Chatterton, 2013*) as residents are more invested to ensure energy bills are low on occupation
- CLH schemes typically have environmentally-friendly construction, improved air quality, wider environmental benefits.

Conclusion

We think the vision for Oxfordshire needs to be, first and foremost, about creating a sustainable place. A sustainable place will enable a diverse range of people to live meaningful, dignified and purposeful lives that contribute to their community and beyond. CFO are happy to advise further on what creating a sustainable place means in practice and work with the Oxfordshire Plan team.

The Oxfordshire Plan 2050 will play a crucial role in ensuring that Oxfordshire becomes an even better place to live and work. What constitutes 'better' needs to be carefully considered in consultation with a diverse range of people and organisations and be reflected fully in the plan. We suggest giving more time and effort to consultation, review and reflection with this in mind - even if this means asking for an extension to the deadline for the plan.

We recommend that unlocking economic growth/building more houses/creating more transport infrastructure as ultimate end goals or reason d'être of the plan should be avoided. These are important objectives and options for making Oxfordshire a better place, however, one should be wary of narrowing down solutions as this shuts down the possibility of creative solutions that could add greater value. Oxfordshire has a wealth of knowledge and ideas contained within its diverse residents, this needs to be, proactively, tapped into to make the plan better.

Enabling creative solutions and the flexibility to respond to change will help the county to flourish. A more open ended and exploratory approach leaves space for the unknowns in the future and enables adaptability and solution finding that works on the ground. What we consider success now is likely to evolve and we need to remain open to new ideas. If Oxfordshire is to become a centre of innovation, space needs to be created for this innovation to happen throughout the county, not just in business but in development, communities and the way we look after the natural environment. This all requires the input of a wide variety of people.

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