



Oxfordshire's Sustainable Community Strategy -
A long term vision for the county

Briefing paper 12: Spatial Oxfordshire

This paper is number 12 in a series of 12 briefing papers prepared to inform the development of the Oxfordshire Sustainable Community Strategy by the Oxfordshire Partnership.

The briefing papers are designed for any individual or organisation interested in finding out more about Oxfordshire. Specifically they have been developed for representatives of organisations in the Oxfordshire Partnership who will be attending workshops and discussions on the Sustainable Community Strategy during 2007.

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I Oxfordshire's Spatial Strategy

I.1 Definition of spatial

Spatial planning includes how land is used and other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function. Land is used for housing, industrial and business premises, roads, agriculture, leisure, areas to conserve biodiversity. In addition to these direct land uses, a thriving economy requires suitable locations for businesses that are well-connected, education requires schools and playgrounds in centres of population, our health relies on access to places for exercise, clean air and hospitals, and the way we provide utilities such as energy and water can affect house design, require pipe networks, treatment facilities and reservoirs.

Many issues with spatial impacts are addressed in other Oxfordshire 2020 theme papers. Some spatial implications of each of the themes are summarised in Appendix B.

I.2 Spatial plans

Important plans which define Oxfordshire's spatial strategy include both statutory plans that are required by law and other agreed strategies. The main spatial statutory plans are the South East Plan, the Oxfordshire Structure Plan, Local Development Frameworks and Local Plans. The purpose of each of these is outlined below.

The draft South East Plan is the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East. This plan will provide the strategic framework to guide development for Oxfordshire and for other counties in the South East of England up to 2026. This is a plan which has been drawn up by the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA). The final content will be decided by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The plan has been subject to an 'examination in public' conducted by a panel which ended in March this year. The panel's report to the Secretary of State will be made public later in the year.

The draft South East Plan includes a sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire which proposes that there should be significant new housing development within the built up area of Oxford and at Bicester, Didcot and Wantage&Grove. The strategy also promotes economic development at Bicester and Didcot in particular, and emphasises that growth must be accompanied by timely investment in infrastructure. It also contains policies for the continued protection of the environment and green belts. Once it has been finalised and adopted, the South East Plan will replace the Oxfordshire Structure Plan.

The Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2016 is the strategy for the development and use of land in the county to 2016. The Structure Plan will be replaced under the new planning system by the South East Plan which will provide the strategic framework to guide development in the county. The main themes of the Structure Plan strategy are:

- providing for the development of new homes, jobs and services and facilities;
- concentrating housing development in urban areas;
- providing for an increased number of affordable houses;
- providing the framework to help sustain prosperity;
- protecting the countryside, towns and villages and the landscape setting;
- providing in rural areas for development to support the well-being of communities;
- ensuring supporting infrastructure and services are provided;
- encouraging high quality environments, efficient use of energy and other resources and reducing the need to travel; and
- providing the necessary raw materials for development.

Local Plans and Local Development Frameworks (which will replace Local Plans) provide the detailed spatial strategy within Oxfordshire. There are separate plans for each district: Oxford City; Cherwell; South Oxfordshire; West Oxfordshire; and Vale of White Horse.

Local, county and regional plans are inter-related. The plans for larger geographic areas providing the framework for more detailed plans for smaller geographic areas. The diagram in Appendix C shows how these plans interlink. The plans address different geographies, different levels of detail and different issues but need to work together.

1.3 City, urban and rural spatial strategy

Introduction

The Oxfordshire spatial strategy requires different approaches for different types of community. These strategies often cut across administrative geographies and require partnership work.

County

Oxfordshire is internationally renowned as a centre of excellence for academia and research and a place of architectural and natural beauty.

Oxfordshire's economy has been one of the fastest growing in the country, both in terms of employment, but more particularly in terms of gross value added. Employment structure has changed significantly, notably in the dramatic decline in the numbers employed in the motor industry over the last 25 years and significant growth of hi-tech employment.

Employers needing skilled staff are, in some cases, located near to pools of economically inactive people without enough skills to find employment. A critical issue is to improve skills development so that the local people can find well paid work rather than employers having to import staff with implications for increased commuting and housing demand. Some parts of the county have not yet attracted high tech businesses or other employers providing high skilled employment.

Oxford City

Oxford is the county town of Oxfordshire with around 138,000 residents. Oxford is the county's transport, tourism, cultural, retail and economic hub. It is a world-class educational centre, an international business hub, a global tourist destination and a world-renowned centre for medical science. Oxford is an affluent city but contains pockets of severe deprivation. The city is undergoing evolutionary change to deliver urban regeneration through the work of East Oxford Action and the West End Renaissance programme, which will enhance the city's economic potential. The spatial strategy has been to promote Oxford as a first class vibrant city building on its strengths – education, health and related research and development activities - without damaging Oxford's heritage and landscape setting or increasing pressures on transport and other services. An ongoing challenge for Oxford is to ensure that housing keeps pace with economic growth and is located to meet the needs of employers without exacerbating the problems of long distance commuting and community cohesion.

Other Towns

Since the 1970s, the spatial strategy for Oxfordshire has promoted increased development in the "country towns" (Banbury, Bicester, Didcot, and Witney) which typically have over 20,000 residents. These larger settlements which are considered to be the most sustainable locations for housing and employment growth due to their range of jobs, services and facilities and the opportunities for walking, cycling and public transport. In the current Structure Plan Grove is identified also for major housing growth. The aim has been to help spread the benefits of Oxfordshire's prosperous economy to create thriving second-tier towns and to reduce the need for commuting to Oxford. This in turn has required policies to encourage a better balance between homes and jobs in these towns. In smaller market towns and villages, spatial policy has allowed for some limited development of an appropriate scale to support the needs of local communities.¹

Rural

Of the 308 parishes with a population below 10,000 people, three quarters (231) have fewer than 1,000 residents. Oxfordshire's rural areas generally have low levels of deprivation, crime and similar educational achievement and health to the county as a whole. However, secure jobs in traditional rural occupations continue to decline, house prices are out of reach to workers in rural areas and increasing car use affects the safety of local roads and the viability of local services. Oxfordshire's Rural Framework Strategy² provides broad priorities and sets out the challenges for rural communities. Spatial policy has been to focus development in urban areas on previously developed land with development in smaller settlements limited to that required to meet local needs and support balanced communities in villages.

¹ Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2016 Policy H1. www.oxfordshire.gov.uk

² The Draft Rural Framework Strategy (4 June 2007) is on the Oxfordshire Data Observatory website www.oxfordshireobservatory.info under Data/Themes/Rural.

1.4 Vulnerable people

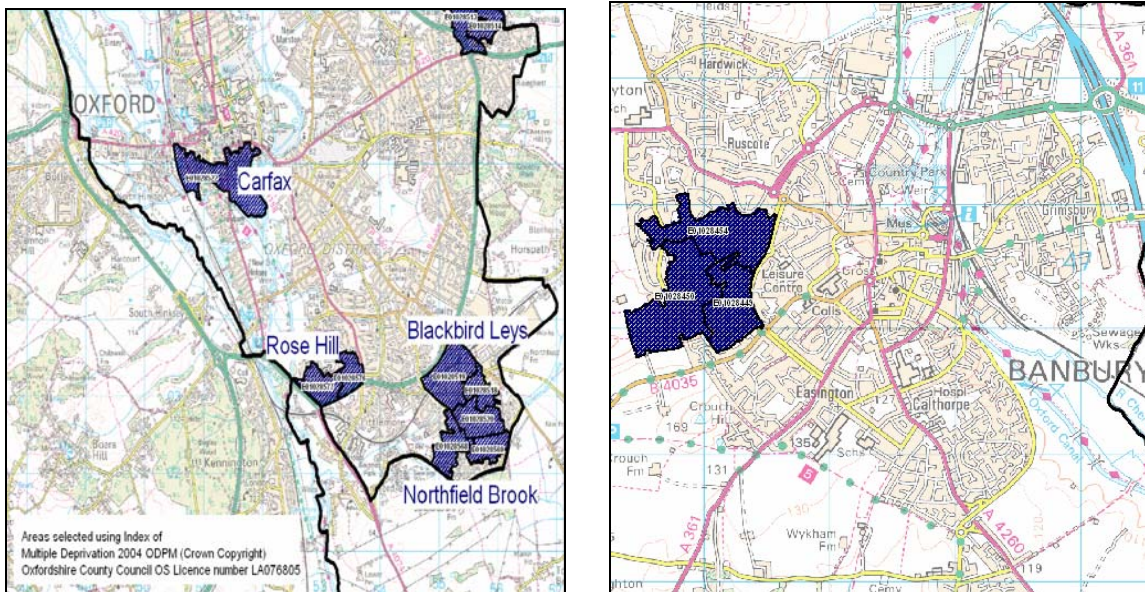
Introduction

While Oxfordshire is a prosperous, healthy county with a good environment, it also has areas with significant numbers of people who do not have a good quality of life due to poverty, health problems, poor educational attainment, old-age, and often a combination of these factors.

Deprivation

Oxfordshire is generally prosperous but has 13 areas of urban deprivation which fall in the 20 per cent most deprived areas nationally. Issues in these places are being addressed under an “area” programme (discussed in the economy theme paper).

Deprived areas in Oxfordshire



Other groups of potentially vulnerable people (for example those with low educational attainment, certain ethnic groups, the elderly, repeat offenders, and homeless people) also tend to be clustered geographically. Maps such as those above can be used to show where the highest proportions of such groups are located in order to provide appropriate support in the right places.

2 Threats and opportunities for the future

A key challenge is to implement the strategy in the South East Plan to deliver sustainable thriving communities. Table 2.1 summarises some key threats to and opportunities for achieving the spatial dimensions of this strategy. Some threats also present opportunities and vice versa.

2.1 Spatial threats and opportunities

Issue	Threats	Opportunities
Development growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralisation of services could reduce vitality of rural settlements and market towns (eg libraries, hospitals, post offices). • Accommodating the levels of growth that will be decided in South East Plan. Pressures on the setting and character of our settlements. • High house prices in relation to local wages. Trend to dormitory villages and towns due to commuting to high-paid jobs. Impact of commuting on community cohesion and economic impact from loss of productivity. • Pace of development could continue to outstrip infrastructure and facilities. • Country towns housing/employment imbalance with impacts on wider community. • A shortage of housing for workers in Oxford fuels demand for rented accommodation which has resulted in a disproportionately high rental sector with consequent impacts on the local community. • Urbanisation of rural settlements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for world-class facilities in and near urban centres (eg hospitals, Oxford west end). • Potential for capitalising on world class facilities (eg Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, universities, hospitals). • Development should make significant contributions to infrastructure provision. • Provision of more affordable housing together with development. • Funds for regeneration of deprived areas, particularly areas of urban deprivation in Oxford & Banbury (see section 1.4). • Partnership approaches to place shaping could improve delivery (eg links among different tiers of local authorities, Primary Health Trust, Thames Valley Police, voluntary organisations, developers, local champions). • Planning for future sustainable communities in areas of housing growth could reduce the need to travel, improvements to infrastructure, town centres, better quality housing, services, green spaces. • Potential to improve the sustainability of clusters of villages with links to each other eg local food, shared facilities.
Economic development, labour supply and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tight labour market: growth in and skills of local population may not keep pace with employer needs. • Local skills may not improve sufficiently to support growth in knowledge based economy. • Failure to support growing economy sustainably eg business parks located in unsustainable locations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science & research clusters provide high skilled employment e.g. Harwell Science and Innovation campus, the Oxford University Radcliffe, and Science Park. • Location and proximity to transport networks attractive to employers. • Migration provides labour supply (low and high skilled). • Place shaping at key urban centres attracts high-skilled employers eg Oxford, Bicester, Didcot, Wantage&Grove.

Issue	Threats	Opportunities
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High tech employment base and labour shortages could provide incentives to increase economic activity rates and skill levels of people working locally.
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased employment/housing imbalances and increased journey times could worsen congestion, limit economic growth and worsen quality of life. • Constraints on land and housing supply and worsening affordability could undermine the local economy. • Lack of suitable housing may limit economic growth. Business park ventures and growth of existing businesses can be vulnerable to housing constraints. Lack of suitable housing for key workers is also a major problem for the hospitals, universities and other service sector employers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible working and live:work trends could reduce congestion. • Use the need for housing development to shape thriving communities.
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate investment would hamper further successful economic development of Oxfordshire. • Thriving communities in locations of future housing growth will be dependent on adequate infrastructure. • Worsening congestion on the road and rail networks. • Lack of infrastructure to address existing needs could increase public opposition to development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved transport links. • Olympic Games (potential for new and enhanced tourism and leisure facilities). • Reservoir (if needed and built) could improve leisure provision, biodiversity & transport links to key employment sites as well as water supply. • East-west rail would improve access to Oxford and along Oxford-Cambridge arc, which would attract employers and residents (eg Bicester, better access to Oxford). • Improvements in the road network (eg A34 corridor, provisional new funding from Regional Transport Board). • Congestion leads to behaviour change eg national road pricing or congestion could reduce peak hour journeys.
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in services does not keep pace with demographic change and housing growth. • Centralisation of services reduces access (eg hospitals, public transport), places pressure on service providers if demand exceeds critical thresholds, and reduces viability of local service provision. • Ageing population: requiring different facilities, eg social facilities, sheltered housing, access to services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migration, population and housing growth should support investment in services, including funds for publicly provided and maintained facilities such as pools. • Multiple uses of buildings and shared facilities and community provision could support and enhance local services and community facilities (post offices, halls, green spaces, leisure facilities) • Shared facilities and centralisation could lead to more efficient operation and better facilities as has been shown in the Headington Hospitals

Issue	Threats	Opportunities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migration: different groups may have specific service requirements; possible impact of rapid migration on community cohesion. 	<p>cluster in Oxford.</p>
<p>Quality of environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of development pressures on city, town and village character, built and historic environment and environmental quality. • Impact of development on biodiversity. • Major landscape change if reservoir is built and disruption to environment and landscape during construction. • Impact on environment of worsening congestion. • Impact of changing climate on land-use and places, landscape character and biodiversity: impacts on building stock of increased flood-risk, more frequent severe storms, higher temperatures; impact of worse and more frequent droughts on landscape, agriculture and wildlife; impact of mitigation policies on cost of energy. • Failure to decouple growth from increasing carbon footprint. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality environment and good communication links make the county an attractive place in which to live and work • Tourism potential in historic city of Oxford, attractive towns and villages, the Ridgeway, Thames River and countryside, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Cotswolds, Chilterns, North Wessex Downs). • Opportunities for better quality and more sustainable buildings to be promoted through the land-use planning processes. • Social opportunities in communities as they organise to address climate change and environmental concerns.

2.2 Issues and options for the Sustainable Communities Strategy

Based on the threats and opportunities, the review group for this paper (see Appendix D) considered that the main spatial challenges for the Sustainable Community Strategy to address are shaping thriving communities and accommodating growth. Each of these challenges requires attention to be given to a range of issues, as summarised below.

1. **Shaping thriving communities** (places that work for people now and in the long term).

- Successful development is not just about bricks and mortar, but about how to foster thriving communities.
- Partnership working (local authorities, health, police, voluntary organisations) on spatial planning and place shaping could help to connect separate initiatives and harness resources to achieve better results for people more effectively and cost-effectively (eg town centres, better transport networks, attracting employers to business parks, access to services).
- Plans and strategies with spatial implications (from community plans to regional and government guidance, covering a wide range of issues) need to interact and overlap coherently.
- The impact of increased storms, flooding and droughts on the built environment, landscape and wildlife due to climate change will need to be factored into spatial planning and place shaping. There are likely to be economic impacts from climate change mitigation policies including higher energy costs which could lead to worsening deprivation and isolation of people in villages and rural areas that may not have adequate or affordable public transport.

2. **Accommodating growth** in a sustainable way that benefits everyone.

- Accommodating the levels of housing growth that are likely to be required under the South East Plan in a sustainable way requires housing/employment balance. Countywide, housing and employment are reasonably well balanced but employment needs to continue to keep pace with population and housing growth at key urban centres (including the country towns) and to offer high skilled highly paid jobs to reduce the growth in long-distance commuting. The converse is also true, particularly in Oxford. Housing should keep pace and be located to meet the needs of employers. Meeting housing needs close to existing employment is necessary so as not to exacerbate the problems of long distance commuting and reduced community cohesion.
- Timely infrastructure provision (eg east-west rail, public transport, leisure facilities, green infrastructure, children's facilities). Future planned growth will create further pressures for timely infrastructure development such as town centres, public transport, schools and leisure facilities. Infrastructure and service provision needs to be delivered together with future housing growth and to meet pressures from past and committed growth.

- “Smart Growth”: Growth that builds on Oxfordshire’s existing economic resources without jeopardising the high quality environment. Oxfordshire has a prosperous and diverse economy. A priority for the county is to ‘help the economy grow as fast as possible with a real choice of access to jobs, homes, leisure and services and in a way that does not prejudice the future of our environment’.³ The spatial strategy for the economy is to maximise the productive value of resources including human capital, land and natural resources.⁴ To this end Oxfordshire is emphasising “smart growth” including encouraging high technology firms in preference to warehouses and low-skilled manufacturing.

³ Oxfordshire County Council strategic priority www.oxfordshire.gov.uk

⁴ South East Plan policy RE5 www.southeast-ra.gov.uk