

## OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

### South East plan: District Housing Distribution

#### **Central Oxfordshire Sub-regional Strategy – Process of Preparing Sub-Regional Advice and Housing Distribution**

##### **Introduction**

1. This background note sets out the process followed and the work undertaken in drawing up a preferred spatial strategy for central Oxfordshire and housing distribution for the sub-region and rest of county.
2. In July 2004 SEERA commissioned from Oxfordshire County Council the preparation of a draft sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council is the principal body responsible for the preparation of this advice to SEERA. Work undertaken has been progressed through the Central Oxfordshire Steering Group supported by an officer working group, working to briefs from the South East Regional Assembly (SEERA).

##### **Spatial strategy for central Oxfordshire**

###### **a) Central Oxfordshire study**

3. A Central Oxfordshire sub-regional study was prepared by the county council in April 2004. This was one of several studies undertaken across the region, to help SEERA to decide whether the issues identified in this area required specific treatment and policies in the South East Plan.
4. The central Oxfordshire study suggested four options for future development:
  - focus on higher densities in urban areas and continue with the country towns strategy;
  - a major review of the Oxford Green Belt – eg public transport based urban extensions/corridor development;
  - major public transport/ICT (broadband) corridor development linked to an extended Expressway Oxford (guided busway);
  - major new settlement(s).
5. The project brief for the preparation of a sub-regional study was issued by SEERA in August 2004. Work on preparing a strategy took place in Autumn 2004. The Central Oxfordshire Steering Group agreed on 6 September 2004 that higher densities within urban areas and a package of transport measures were likely to form common elements to any strategy. They also noted that there was little prospect of developing a major new settlement that did not impinge on existing settlements in the area. The Group considered that the main focus of the work should be on two main options, with other options possibly emerging from this:
  - **Option A:** the development of larger settlements beyond the green belt;
  - **Option B:** one or more significant urban extensions to Oxford.

6. A Sustainability Appraisal of these options was carried out in September 2004, at which stage key sustainability issues for Oxfordshire in terms of priority and deliverability were identified.

**b) Option A: The development of larger settlements beyond the green belt**

7. From the feasibility studies and other work, it was concluded that two towns beyond the Green Belt appeared to have potential for significant further development – Bicester and Didcot. It was concluded that there is land for housing growth at both Bicester and Didcot without serious environmental detriment if the physical, social and economic infrastructure issues can be addressed. However, because both towns have strong rail links to London, there is a risk of them simply adding to south east housing numbers as a dormitory rather than to the vitality of the central Oxfordshire sub-region. The feasibility work showed that a strategy for growth in these two towns needed to be linked to one of providing high value added research/science based employment within easy travel routes, and changing the economic and social profile of the towns. It was concluded that there also could be limited scope for further development at Wantage & Grove. Development here would help to provide homes for people working at Milton Park and Harwell in a location that is not dependent on the A34.

**c) Option B: One or more significant urban extensions to Oxford**

8. Work on the preparation of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan suggested two main areas with potential for significant development: immediately to the south of Oxford, beyond Littlemore and Sandford, and as a "semi-detached" extension in the area to the west of Kidlington towards Begbroke and Yarnton. This option would involve significant revisions to the Oxford green belt.

9. The principal arguments in favour of relaxing the green belt boundaries were that it would allow housing to be built next to the urban area where there is the greatest need, that it could allow additional employment land releases where there is great demand and help to capitalise on the concentration of research and development activity at Oxford, and that development adjoining Oxford would be easier to serve by public transport than elsewhere.

10. The County Council considers that the first two of these arguments have been addressed over many years by successive secretaries of state, EIP panels and planning inspectors. In essence, the decision makers have concluded that there was not enough force in them to override the importance which they attached to protecting the special character of Oxford in its landscape setting.

11. The development of the Oxfordshire economy over recent years has involved the growth of a number of "business clusters". It has also demonstrated that such clusters do not need to be physically contiguous in order to be successful. More important seem to be factors such as the existence of a pool of skills and knowledge and the opportunity to create and maintain good networks. This is illustrated by sectors as diverse as motor sport engineering and biotechnology. Moreover, given the current imbalance between jobs and housing, the County Council considers that significant increases in employment at Oxford would inevitably put pressure on the housing stock and transport network.

#### **d) Initial Conclusions**

12. Initial conclusions were that either of the options could provide for a continuation of the level of growth in RPG9. A much higher rate of housing provision was considered likely to require a hybrid with elements of both options. The overall provision for Oxfordshire in the draft South East Plan of 2,360 dwellings per annum 2006 –2016 is marginally less than RPG9 and the provision in the Structure Plan to 2016.

13. In terms of matching the strategy most closely to the terms of SEERA's brief and the vision for central Oxfordshire in the draft SE Plan, the County Council's Executive in October 2004 resolved that the preferred strategy for further development in central Oxfordshire should be that outlined in option A (Development of larger settlements beyond the green belt) with a level of growth close to that currently in RPG9. The County Council considered that this performed better than Option B in terms of protecting Oxford's internationally important character and landscape setting and avoiding coalescence with surrounding villages, and in terms of providing a polycentric pattern of growth in central Oxfordshire. Such a pattern of growth would provide an opportunity for the beneficial development of some of the larger towns in central Oxfordshire. This should broaden their employment base and provide scope for more people to live and work in the same town.

14. The development of a major new settlement in the Central Oxfordshire area would not be consistent with national and emerging regional policy, nor is it required to meet Oxfordshire's regional housing requirement, which can be met by either of the options outlined above. Government guidance, as set out in PPG3, states that a sequential approach should be followed when considering options for the location of development. In essence that means new settlements should only be considered if no more sustainable alternative exists and a good quality public transport corridor can be exploited. This is not the case in Oxfordshire. The draft SE Plan has at its core an urban focus, seeking to concentrate future development in and around urban areas.

15. The County Council stressed that any future growth in the county is dependent on the provision of infrastructure, in its widest sense, both to cater for new development and to make up the backlog.

#### **South East Plan Consultation**

16. The draft South East Plan was published for consultation in January 2005. It outlined two main options for accommodating development in central Oxfordshire (see paragraph 5 above).

17. The consultation responses showed strong support for retaining green belts at both the regional and sub-regional level. There was also a clear majority in favour of option A for central Oxfordshire rather than option B. A number of respondents have argued for development in particular parts of the green belt; these include Oxford University seeking development to the west of Kidlington, proposals for development south of Grenoble Road to the south of Oxford, and a proposed development at Shipton Quarry.

18. GOSE referred to the Panel report on the Oxfordshire Structure Plan in its response to the draft SE Plan and said it would be advisable for the Assembly to reconsider the need for selective review of the green belt boundaries. The EIP Panel suggested a need for a

more detailed and comprehensive review of options, but noted that such a review was not likely to be completed in time to feed into the SE Plan strategy. They suggested that a review might be carried forward by joint local development documents, but gave no indication of how they saw this progressing under the new planning act if one or more district planning authorities did not wish to proceed in this way.

19. The Regional Planning Committee on 13 June 2005 when it considered responses to the consultation on the draft South East Plan confirmed that existing green belts in the region should be retained. The Assembly endorsed this on 13 July 2005. The draft South east Plan, submitted to government on 29 July states that the Assembly considers that there is no case for strategic review of Green Belts within the region while noting that minor reviews, if required, could be carried out through local development frameworks.

## **Housing Distribution for Oxfordshire**

### **a) Methodology**

20. In January 2005 SEERA asked the County Council for advice on the next stage of work developing the spatial option – the distribution of the housing requirement by district, both for the central Oxfordshire sub-region and for the rest of the county. This advice should be formulated following engagement with key stakeholders and subject to public consultation. A supplementary brief was issued in April, outlining a revised timetable, which asked the County Council to submit to the Assembly their preferred district housing distribution for central Oxfordshire and the rest of the county by 9 December 2005. To assist in this stage of work, independent technical advice on the approach to be adopted was prepared by DTZ Pieda Consulting. DTZ's advice sought to ensure consistency in approach to this matter across the region, although it was not meant to be prescriptive. The approach recommended a sequential approach: first, identifying existing commitments for housing; second, estimating future potential (see paragraph 22) and third, distributing the 'unallocated' housing requirement. In carrying out this third stage, the guidance asks authorities to follow a five step approach:

- identifying opportunities and constraints
- developing spatial options
- implied district housing distribution
- option appraisal
- iteration and preferred district housing distribution.

21. Work on identifying opportunities and constraints has drawn from feasibility studies and other work and informed the development of the county council's spatial options for consultation. Following the DTZ guidance, the spatial options which the County Council consulted on (see para 23) were appraised in terms of conformity with policies in the South East Plan and key sustainability issues.

### **b) Housing requirement for Oxfordshire**

22. On 13 July 2005 SEERA agreed a division of housing between central Oxfordshire (1,700 dwellings per year) and the rest of Oxfordshire (660 dwellings per year) as part of an overall provision for Oxfordshire of 2,360 dwellings pa 2006–2026. This compared to

an average annual rate of 2,480 in the Structure Plan 2001–2016 and the regional planning guidance (RPG9) figure of 2,430 dwellings per year.

23. The housing levels decided by SEERA required 47,200 dwellings to be built in the county between 2006 to 2026. Following the agreed methodology prepared by DTZ, work was undertaken to estimate “housing potential” – the number of houses expected to be built on existing sites with planning permission, sites allocated in local plans, dwellings yet to be identified to meet Structure Plan requirements to 2016, and other “windfall” sites that were expected to become available based on previous experience. This work showed that 26,600 dwellings were already planned to meet Structure Plan requirements to 2016 and that a further 11,000 could come forward on previously developed land to 2026. Therefore the number of additional dwellings that needed to be provided for on greenfield land was estimated to be approximately 8,000 dwellings in central Oxfordshire and 2,000 dwellings in the rest of the county.

### **c) Housing distribution for central Oxfordshire**

24. The Steering Group agreed that two variants of the County Council’s preferred strategy should be produced for consultation:

- **Distribution 1.** Most of the additional greenfield requirement is divided between Bicester and Didcot; and
- **Distribution 2.** A larger part of the additional housing requirement is allocated to the southern part of the county (including Wantage & Grove) where there is potential for significant employment growth.

25. A particular issue is how many houses could be built on sites in Oxford and the possible contribution of safeguarded land. For consultation purposes the distributions included 6,500 dwellings in the city 2006-2026, which is about the current housing potential estimate.

26. The second Sustainability Appraisal in July 2005 examined these options with regard to key sustainability issues.

### **d) Housing distribution for the Rest of Oxfordshire**

27. The amount of housing proposed by SEERA for the rest of the county is 660 dwellings per year or 13,200 dwellings over the plan period 2006–2026. The focus has been to consider how additional development that is required might be distributed among the districts in line with the overall urban focus of the draft South East Plan.

28. The illustrative distribution for the rest of the county could provide for continued “organic growth” at Banbury of up to 190 dwellings each year, reflecting Banbury’s role as a significant employment and shopping centre. Building rates would reduce after 2016 (assuming structure plan provision is built). About two thirds of the dwellings could be built on sites within the town but additional greenfield land would be required.

29. Elsewhere the figures imply some additional greenfield development in each district (or on large windfall sites which have not been taken into account) after 2016 focused on the larger towns and villages which could help to meet some requirements for affordable housing.

## **Consultation**

### **a) Options decided for consultation**

30. On 6 September the County Council's Cabinet agreed two options for consultation on the housing distribution based on Option A, having taken into account development that is already planned and development that could be built on previously developed land. The two options were:

- **Option 1.** Most of the additional greenfield requirement divided equally between Bicester and Didcot (about 4,000 homes at each town); and
- **Option 2.** Concentrating more of the greenfield development in the south of the county where there is potential for significant employment growth. This would mean up to 4,000 homes at Didcot, about 2,000 at Wantage & Grove, and about 2,000 at Bicester.

31. The consultation also gave the opportunity for people to suggest an alternative distribution.

### **b) Consultation process**

32. The consultation ran for 6 weeks from 16 September to 28 October, although the first three days allowed only partial access to the consultation materials due to the Cabinet decision being called in by the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee for consideration. The consultation was widely publicised in papers and on posters at libraries and local authority offices, and through exhibitions at key locations. Consultation booklets were distributed by direct mailing to local councils, previous consultees on the Oxfordshire Structure Plan, and the Council's citizens' panel (3,000 people), parish councils and anyone who requested them. More than 3,000 responses were received. The results are summarized in the Statement of Consultation.

## **Final decision on preferred option and housing distribution**

33. On 1 November 2005 the County Council debated the interim results of the consultation. Noting that SEERA has ruled out strategic green belt reviews, the Council agreed to advise Cabinet:

- a) that proposals to be submitted to SEERA on the future distribution of housing should not involve encroachment upon the Oxford Green Belt;
- b) that those options identified in the consultation responses which would involve such encroachment (such as those based on major development on the southern edge of Oxford or at Shipton Quarry) should not be adopted.

34. On the basis of the information that was then available the Council also agreed to advise the Cabinet that its relative preference for the respective housing distribution options was as follows: option 1 (23 votes), option 2 (21 votes), 20 abstentions, and 4 voting against both options.

35. The County Council's advice as a Principal Authority on the sub-regional strategy for Central Oxfordshire and the district housing distribution was agreed by the Council's Cabinet on 6 December 2005. The Cabinet resolved

- (a) In accordance with the Council's advice, noting that SEERA has ruled out strategic green belt reviews:
- (1) That the proposals to be submitted to SEERA on the future distribution of housing should not involve encroachment upon the Oxford Green Belt;
  - (2) That those options identified in consultation responses which would involve such encroachment (such as those based on major development on the southern edge of Oxford or at Shipton Quarry) should not be adopted;
- (b) That the district housing distribution and strategy for the Central Oxfordshire sub-region for submission to SEERA comprise the following:
- (1) The remaining 7,300 houses in Central Oxfordshire to be distributed as follows:
    - 2,000 houses at Bicester;
    - 3,000 houses at Didcot;
    - 1,400 houses at Wantage/Grove;
    - 300 houses within Oxford in addition to the 6,700 houses already identified, on the basis of the possible release of some safeguarded land;
    - 600 houses to be divided equally between South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire to allow some flexibility to plan for more local housing needs within the sub-region;
  - (2) in the rest of the county area, the proposed distribution to allow for limited development to meet local needs, and organic growth at Banbury;
- as set out in more detail in Annex A, and subject to the timely provision of necessary infrastructure;
- (c) that the statement of consultation in annex 1 to the report and the information in Annexes 3-9 should be submitted to SEERA as technical supporting information as required by SEERA, subject to authorising the Head of Sustainable Development to make the amendments necessary as a consequence of the Cabinet's decision on the housing distribution in (b) above, and to carry out minor editing before submission;
- (d) to request SEERA to amend the sub-regional boundary to include RAF Benson within Central Oxfordshire;
- (e) to request SEERA to amend the boundary of the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley sub-region to exclude the small part of South Oxfordshire from that sub-region;
- (f) to record that in the opinion of the Cabinet these decisions are urgent in that advice is required to be submitted to SEERA by 9 December and that the delay which would be caused by the call in process would therefore seriously prejudice the Council's or the public interests; and that in accordance with Scrutiny Procedure Rule (17)(a), subject to the concurrence of the Chairman of the Council, the call-in procedure should not apply.