

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

South East Plan: District Housing Distribution

Statement of Consultation

Introduction

1. This report summarises the work undertaken by Oxfordshire County Council to consult the public regarding the district housing distribution for Oxfordshire to be included in the South East Plan.
2. As part of the preparation of the South East Plan the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) has asked the county council to advise it on a district housing distribution by the 9 December 2005. This district housing distribution has been prepared for both the central Oxfordshire sub-region and the rest of Oxfordshire. The preparation of this advice included a six week public consultation in September and October 2005.
3. The consultation in September 2005 was preceded by an earlier consultation carried out by SEERA in January 2005. This was to consult on the Draft South East Plan 2026. It outlined two main options for accommodating development in central Oxfordshire (full details of these options are included in the county council's background document 'Options Considered'). The county council held five public debates on the draft Plan and also arranged two special briefings for town and parish councils to provide information and explain how its proposals might affect Oxfordshire. Full details of the consultation were also made available on the council's website. The comments received and the county council's response to them are included in Annex 9. 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.
4. The work undertaken to prepare a district housing distribution has been progressed through the Central Oxfordshire Steering Group. This group comprises the representatives of the district councils and of social, economic, environmental and other partners and is chaired by the Leader of the County Council. The steering group has been advised at all stages by the Central Oxfordshire Officer Working Group which also consists of representatives of county and district councils, social, economic, environmental and other partners. These included; the Environment Agency, Oxfordshire Economic Partnership, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and the South East Forum for Sustainability.
5. The County Council's Cabinet considered and agreed the arrangements for consultation on the 6 September 2005. The final advice submitted to SEERA on the 9 December was also considered and agreed by the County Council's Cabinet on the 6 December 2005. Full Council and Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee considered the housing distribution and the responses to the consultation on 1 November and 1 December 2005 respectively in order to feed in any views to the County Council Cabinet on 6 December.

6. The consultation on the district housing distribution ran for a period of six weeks – from 16 September 2005 until 28 October 2005. However, on 13 September 2005 the decision of the County Council's Cabinet on the 6 September was called in for review by the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee who considered the Cabinet's decision on 21 September. They subsequently endorsed the Cabinet's decision. Some consultation material was held back until the 21 September (including consultation leaflets to be sent to the Citizens' Panel and material on the county council's website).
7. The primary objectives of the consultation were to inform county residents and stakeholders of the requirement for new housing and set out the council's 'preferred' housing distribution options; generate local debate on housing distribution and empower people to have their say, obtain structured feedback on the council's 'preferred' housing distribution options, and provide an opportunity for residents and stakeholders to suggest their own distribution option.

Partnership working

8. District authorities (including a number from adjoining authorities) have been involved in the process of preparing a housing distribution at all stages, both at officer and member levels. Other partners such as Thames Water and the Environment Agency were also involved on a technical level through informal meetings and working groups.

Stakeholder involvement

9. A range of stakeholders (including Government agencies, infrastructure and service providers and other relevant interest groups) have been involved prior to the start of the public consultation. These were written to in June 2005 asking for technical comments on the county council's preferred strategy; they were again consulted during September 2005. A special briefing for stakeholders was also held during the consultation period.

Consultation summary

Who was consulted and how:

10. The following were consulted and by the methods set out below:
 - All town and parish councils in Oxfordshire - standard letter and consultation booklet sent to each. All town and parish council's were also invited to a briefing
 - The Citizens' Panel (the council's broadly representative research panel of 3,000 members of the public) - panel members were sent a copy of the consultation booklet and asked to comment on the options. The purpose was to try and encourage a response from the wider residential community, not just those living in areas of the county directly affected by the housing proposals. The consultation was not included as part of the existing surveys conducted on a quarterly basis but communicated as a 'one off' optional consultation to Panel members
 - Stakeholders and consultees (including those listed in PPS11 and others previously consulted during Oxfordshire Structure Plan consultations) – standard letter and consultation booklet sent to each. All stakeholders were also invited to a briefing.

- All public libraries in Oxfordshire – 700 consultation booklets and consultation poster were distributed to all libraries for public display.
- All local area offices and one stop shops in Oxfordshire - consultation booklets and consultation poster sent to each for public display
- The five district authorities in Oxfordshire – each district was consulted in its role as a planning authority (under PPS11), 500 consultation booklets and consultation posters were also sent to each for public display and to be distributed as they wished. District authorities were also invited to a briefing
- All County Council Members – standard letter and consultation booklets sent to each.
- The public in general – through the local media, the county council’s website, public exhibitions and relevant areas listed above (e.g. public libraries). Copies of the consultation booklet were available to the public on request (including bulk requests)
- The local media – this included securing a feature in the Oxford Times, on-going coverage in local papers and articles in county council publications such as ‘Parish News’
- The six parish councils in South Oxfordshire that fall in the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley sub-region – a letter giving further information and full details of the consultation for the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley sub-region was sent to each.

Materials and dissemination methods:

11. A booklet (including a freepost questionnaire), a poster and other background publications were produced for all target audiences of the consultation; these are listed in paragraph 41. The booklet was targeted for a wide range of people and written in plain English to encourage members of the public to comment. The background material published on the website was aimed at a more technical audience.
12. All details of the consultation were made available on the county council’s website, this included: the consultation booklet, background reports, an online response form, details of exhibitions, contact information for the planning team (including by telephone and email), links to SEERA’s website and the South East Plan website and details of relevant press releases issued by the county council. This information was for all target audiences.
13. Two briefings to explain the consultation options and provide an opportunity to ask questions were held on the following:
 - 27 September 2005, Oxfordshire County Hall, New Road, Oxford. This briefing was aimed at district, town and parish councils
 - 30 September 2005, Town Hall, St Aldates, Oxford. This briefing was aimed at technical specialists, local organisations and developers
14. Exhibitions were displayed throughout the county (including those areas most likely to be affected by the proposed housing distribution options) during the consultation period; the exhibition consisted of three exhibition stands and a leaflet dispenser. These were primarily aimed at the general public and were designed to draw attention to the consultation and encourage people to take a booklet and respond. The

exhibitions were publicised in a range of media; and advice on the most appropriate locations for the exhibitions was sought from local councils. The venues and dates for the exhibitions were as follows:

Week 1:

- 27 September – 3 October – Westgate Shopping Centre, Oxford
- 27 September – 3 October – Vale of White Horse District Council Offices, Abingdon

Week 2:

- 3 October – 5 October – Bicester Council Chambers, Bicester
- 6 October – 7 October – Castle Quay Shopping Centre, Banbury
- 4 October – 7 October – Cherwell District Council Offices, Bodicote

Week 3:

- 10 October – 16 October – Old Mill Hall, Grove
- 10 October – 16 October – Wantage Civic Hall, Wantage

Week 4:

- 17 October 23 October – Willowbrook Leisure Centre, Didcot
- 17 October – 18 October - West Oxfordshire District Council, Witney
- 19 October – 20 October – Bicester Council Chambers, Bicester

Week 5:

- 24 October – 28 October – Didcot Town Council, Didcot
- 21 October – 28 October – Wantage Civic Hall, Wantage

Publications

15. The following materials were produced for the public consultation, copies are included:

- Consultation booklet – Where should all the new housing go? (13,000 printed in total)
- Consultation poster (100 printed in total)
- Background documents (all made available to download from the county council's website) - Housing distribution tables, Background to main options considered, Feasibility study update, Options appraisal (including sustainability appraisal), Transport issues
- Briefings presentation – presentation material was produced for the briefings held on the 27 and 30 September 2005

Media and public interest

16. The consultation generated a large amount of public interest and press coverage. Press releases were issued before and during the consultation period to generate interest and provide information such as contact details for more information and details of dates of exhibitions. In total 26 articles and letters in relation to the consultation appeared in the Oxford Times, Oxford Mail, Henley Standard, Abingdon Herald and Bicester Advertiser between 1 September 2005 and 28 October 2005. This included a full page launch feature in the Oxford Times.

17. Approximately 50 individuals and organisations attended briefings on the 27 and 30 September.

Summary of responses - main issues and findings

18. The responses to the consultation generated a variety of comments from a range of organisations and individuals, these are summarised below:

The number of responses received:

19. In total 4,049 responses were received from the consultation. Of these 1,714 were completed on the standard response form in the consultation booklet and using the online response form, 227 were written responses in the form of individual letters and emails, and 2,108 were received from campaign groups using their own versions of the response forms (these campaign groups were Didcot Town Council, East Hagbourne Parish Council, Steventon Parish Council, an unidentifiable organisation and Pegasus Planning representing Bride Parks Ltd).

20. 28 responses were received after the consultation deadline, these responses were read but they were not taken into account in the summary of responses.

Consultation booklet response form and online form:

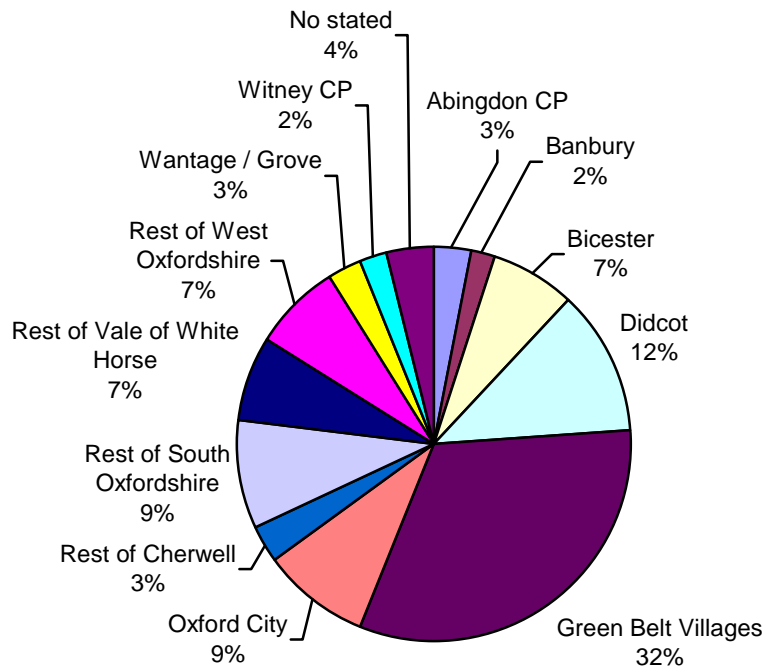
21. The findings below set out the responses as generated by the council's consultation booklet response forms and the council's on-line response form. A range of written proposals were also submitted to the county council in response to this consultation and these have been summarised and presented separately in paragraphs 26-32.

Respondent profile

22. In total, 1,714 consultation responses were received:

- 849 responses hard copy responses (including 23 from organisations and 48 from councils or councillors)
- 170 web responses
- 695 Citizens' Panel hard copy responses

23. Geographically, the single largest proportion of responses was received from Oxfordshire's green belt villages (32%). This was followed somewhat behind by Didcot (12%), Oxford (9%) and 'rest of South Oxfordshire' (9%). The chart below summarises the geographical spread of responses according to geographical areas supplied by the council's planning team.



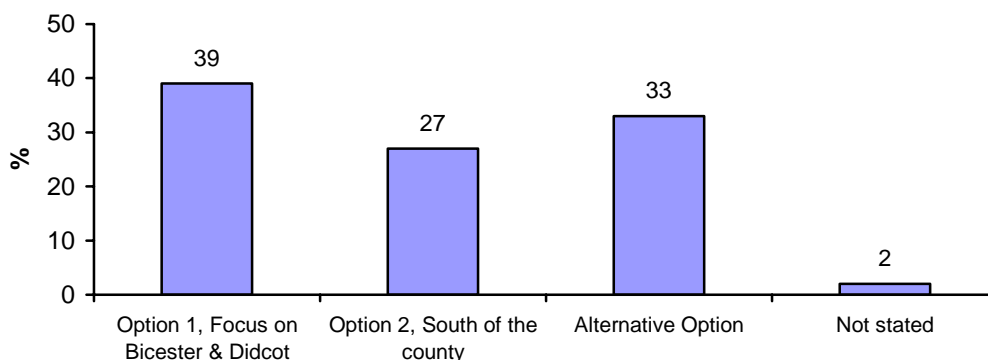
Geographical Distribution of Responses
(Based on 1,714 responses)

Preferred housing option

24. When asked overall which housing distribution option do you prefer; the largest proportion of respondents said 'Option 1' (focus on Bicester and Didcot) 39%. This breaks down as 38% of Citizens' Panel members and 39% of other respondents. Only one in four respondents (27%) preferred 'Option 2' (focus on south of the county); including 43% of Citizens' Panel members and 16% of other respondents.

Preferred Housing Distribution Option

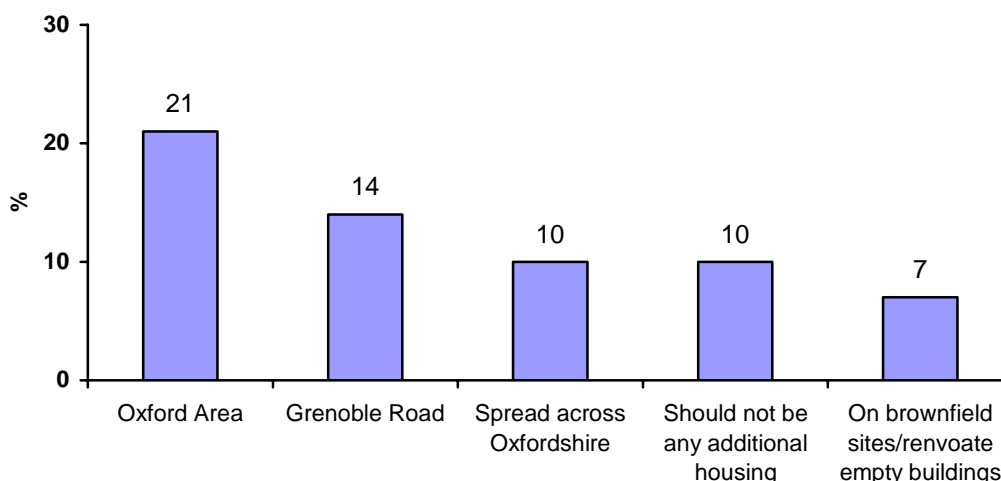
(Based on 1,714 responses)



25. One in three respondents suggested an alternative housing distribution option. The county council specified that if respondents wanted to suggest their own housing distribution option, any alternative must provide for 8,000 homes on greenfield land in the central Oxfordshire sub-region as set out in the consultation booklet. The chart below presents the most frequently mentioned sites for the new homes. In total, 76 different sites were suggested, with Oxford being the most frequently cited response.

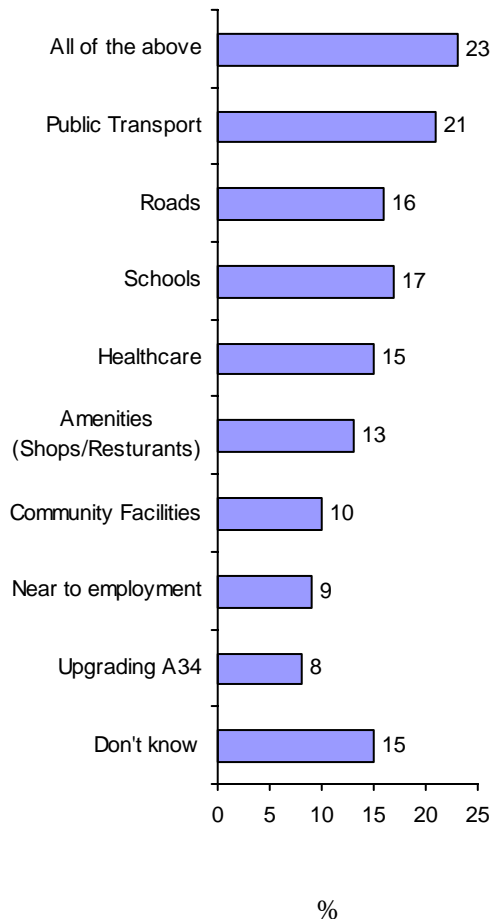
Suggested Alternative Site

(Based on 564 responses)

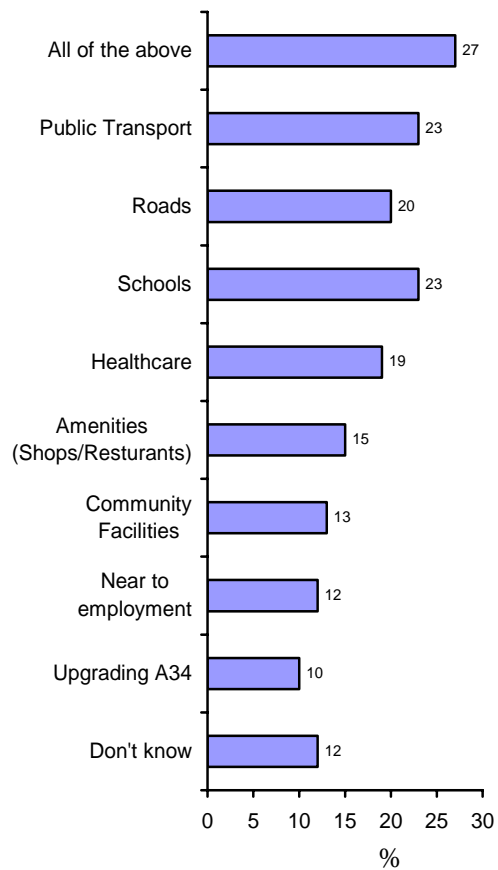


26. The county council will advise SEERA on what infrastructure the county needs to support the new housing development in the county. When respondents were asked what infrastructure would be required for their preferred housing choice, transport infrastructure and the road network were identified as particularly important issues, with the latter being particularly important to those who selected option 2. Education and healthcare were also of prime concern; again particularly to those who had selected option 2.

Option 1: Infrastructure Needs
(Based on 660 responses)



Option 2 : Infrastructure Needs
(Based on 456 responses)



27. Analysis of the infrastructure needs by 'alternative sites' indicates that a majority of those suggesting that the housing should be accommodated in Oxford assume that no further infrastructure will be required.

Summary of supplementary consultation findings:

28. In addition to the county council's own consultation on the South East Plan, several organisations within the county took it upon themselves to conduct their own consultation exercises on how housing might be distributed in the county. These organisations were Didcot Town Council, Steventon Parish Council, East Hagbourne Parish Council, Bride Parks and another unidentifiable organisation.

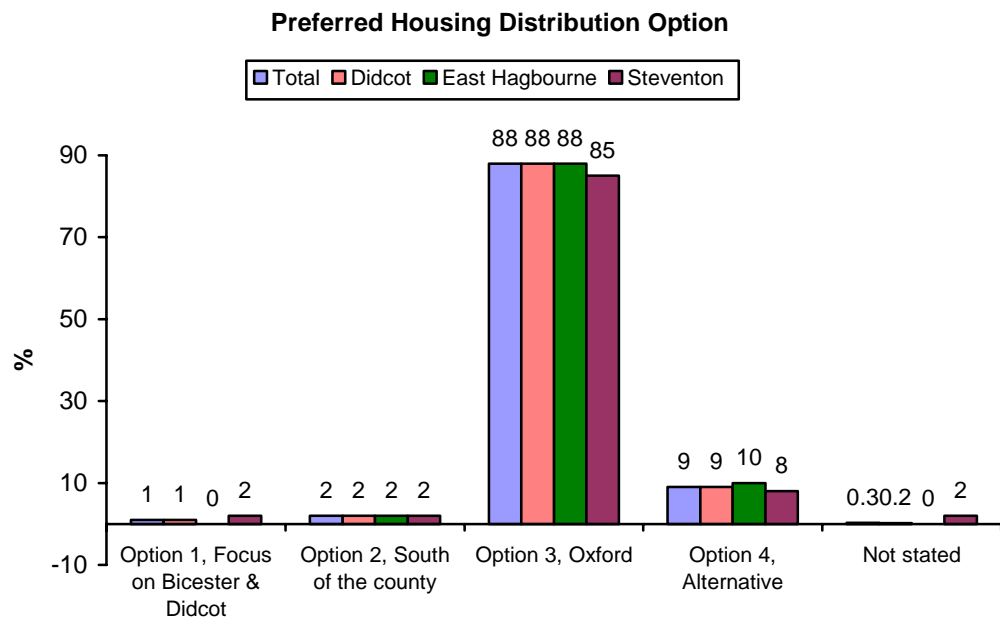
29. A range of different methodologies were employed to distribute consultation response forms (these were not shared with the county council), and each organisation aimed to encourage respondents to agree to the alternative option they had put forward in response to the county council's consultation.

Didcot Town Council, Steventon Parish Council and East Hagbourne Parish Council

30. Didcot Town Council, Steventon Parish Council and East Hagbourne Parish Council joined together to develop a new consultation response form. This was broadly similar to the county council’s own consultation although an additional option, Option 3: ‘8,000 homes primarily in the Oxford area’ was added. In total, 1,450 consultation responses were received and these breakdown as follows:

- Didcot Town Council = 1,222 forms (84%)
- East Hagbourne Parish Council = 133 forms (9%)
- Steventon Parish Council = 95 forms (7%)

31. When asked, overall which housing distribution option do you prefer; the clear majority followed the lead with 88% of respondents saying ‘Option 3’ (8,000 homes primarily in the Oxford area). A small minority however, chose to elect one of the county council’s preferred housing options and 8% proposed an alternative suggestion.



Bride Parks

32. Bride Parks (the landowners of Shipton-on-Cherwell Quarry) developed two different versions of their own consultation response form, one in hard copy and one which formed part of a paid advert in The Oxford Times. Both forms promoted Shipton-on-Cherwell Quarry as an alternative housing distribution site and in total, the hard copy form generated 255 responses and the newspaper advert 69 responses.

Unidentifiable Organisation

33. An unidentifiable organisation developed their own consultation response form, which was again broadly similar to the county council's own consultation form although an additional option, Option 3: 'Alternative' was pre-printed with the following text: "I propose an alternative option in which the 8,000 homes would be sited near the existing suburbs of Oxford, in ways that would be compatible with the plans and aspirations of Oxford City Council. Examples of sites that could be deployed are land south of Grenoble Road, the safeguarded land at Barton, Pear Tree and Summertown and the triangle between Begbroke, Yarnton and Kidlington. Land at the disused Shipton Quarry could also be considered."
34. The infrastructure question was also pre-printed and this read as follows: "This third option is more sustainable than Options 1 and 2 because no major upgrades of transport links will be needed to connect the new houses with employment centres in Oxford. The transport infrastructure around Didcot and the south of the county already needs upgrading to cope with the extra house being built to 2016. Options 1 and 2 require additional extensive and expensive infrastructure if 4000 more houses are built near Didcot between 2016 and 2026."
35. In total, 334 consultation responses were received. All but four respondents followed the pre-printed lead.

Written responses:

36. In total 227 responses were received by letters and email and can be broken down into the following respondent groups:
- Members of the public x 153
 - District councils in Oxfordshire x 5
 - Parish and town councils x 15
 - Developers and landowners x 37
 - Other groups listed in PPS11 (these are groups that the Government recommends are involved in planning consultations) and county council Structure Plan consultees x 17 including: Highways Agency, Chilterns AONB Conservation Board, Thames Valley and Oxfordshire Economic Partnership, Thames Water Utilities, Network Rail, Oxford Bus Company, House Builders Federation – Southern Region, Oxford Green Belt Network, CPRE, Oxford Preservation Trust, Oxford Brookes University and Church Commissioners.
37. The five district councils in Oxfordshire raised the following key issues:
- Vale of White Horse – Support option 1 subject to the following: should increase the figure for Oxford due to potential for redeveloping existing sites and safeguarded land. Will not support further growth on top of what is already planned at Didcot and Wantage/Grove until there are transport improvements. Growth at Didcot and Wantage/Grove should only take place after infrastructure is secured
 - South Oxfordshire – Support option 1 and remain firmly opposed to Green Belt development south of Oxford City. Growth must be preceded by Government

investment in Infrastructure. Also wish to see the boundary of the sub-region amended to include RAF Benson and the Western Corridor should be redrawn to take out any part of South Oxfordshire

- Cherwell – Do not support either option as the overarching preferred strategy of focusing on Bicester as a location for economic and housing growth is not deliverable or sustainable. Support ‘organic growth’ at Bicester of 200 dwellings per year 2016-2026 but should not be the basis for a strategic approach. Express a preference for a strategy that focuses growth on Oxford and Didcot plus sustainable urban extensions to the south of the city in areas of economic potential
- Oxford City – Do not support option 1 or 2. The alternative option that should be promoted is urban extension to Oxford, considered the most sustainable option. A comprehensive review of the green belt is needed with the aim of creating a new and enduring boundary that meets all the needs of the city
- West Oxfordshire – Do not express support for option 1 or 2. Some growth should be directed towards more sustainable locations through a planned extension of Oxford. Reduce the rest of county provision post 2016 and increase Central Oxfordshire.

38. Parish and town councils in Oxfordshire raised the following key issues:

- Development should not take place in the Oxford green belt and pleased it continues to be protected (Drayton St Leonard Parish Council, Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Council)
- Bicester is unsustainable due to weak provision of services and infrastructure (Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Council)
- 8,000 houses should be located near the suburbs of Oxford (e.g. south of Grenoble Road, Begbroke/Yarnton/Kidlington, safeguarded land) to meet the cities needs and where facilities, infrastructure, public transport network and jobs are in place (Upton Parish Council, Didcot Town Council, Sutton Courtney Parish Council, Appleford-on-Thames Parish Council)
- Housing proposals are too high, options for Didcot are unacceptable to the town and the surrounding villages and infrastructure has not been addressed; smaller settlements around Didcot will be threatened by coalescence; Didcot already suffers from a history without adequate infrastructure; future job growth at Harwell is highly speculative; flood risk issues at Didcot need investigation (Shiplake Parish Council, West Hagbourne Parish Council, Didcot Town Council, East Hagbourne Parish Council)
- Spreading development across all settlements could be sustainable (West Hagbourne Parish Council)
- Oxfordshire cannot take much more development (Combe Parish Council)
- Areas towards Oxford and West of Kidlington are inappropriate for development (Kidlington Parish Council)
- A more radical approach than the country towns strategy is desirable and future development options need to be comprehensively reviewed, such as dispersing development amongst all communities within central Oxfordshire, including the green belt (Kidlington Parish Council, Long Wittenham Parish Council)
- Previously developed sites such as MOD land, Shipton Quarry and Harwell should be used (Long Wittenham Parish Council)
- Option 2 least preferred because road network is inadequate; Option 1 has some merit in that Bicester is an expanding town but there would still be traffic congestion (Marcham Parish Council)

- Provision of adequate infrastructure will require massive investment from Central Government; road and rail infrastructure currently at capacity; vital that new developments have excellent public transport links; existing shortfall of infrastructure 2006-2016 will not be met; important that all infrastructure such as schools, water and drainage are provided (Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Council, Combe Parish Council)
- Shiplake Parish Council who fall within the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley sub-region raised the following issue: request that the parish is removed from the Western Corridor and placed with the rest of South Oxfordshire where there is more in common; believe that other parishes affected have the same opinion.

39. A number of alternative locations for development were suggested by developers and landowners, these included:

- More development to that already planned at Oxford, Banbury, Didcot, Witney, Bicester and Wantage & Grove; south of Grenoble Road (Oxford); safeguarded land in Oxford at Barton, Pear Tree and Summertown; the Begbroke-Yarnton-Kidlington triangle; Wheatley; MOD land at Upper Heyford, RAF Bicester and Vauxhall Barracks; smaller towns such as Thame, Wallingford and Chipping Norton and new settlements at Sunningwell, Shipton-on-Cherwell Quarry and south east of Oxford.

Other key issues raised by developers and landowners included:

- Need far more housing than in SEERA's plan
- Options put forward are unsatisfactory and inadequate; a comprehensive review of growth options should be undertaken
- Need to reconsider the commitment to central Oxon at the expense of locations outside
- Capacity of all potential sites in central Oxon should be taken into account first (windfalls have been overestimated) and question urban potential estimates
- Any future development must involve mixed use development which delivers communities
- Provision of affordable housing should be distributed throughout the district and not blanketed onto one site or area
- Important a realistic view of infrastructure is taken which should be phased as development progresses rather than placing unrealistic burdens on development by requiring too much up front; Bicester and Didcot can take advantage of existing infrastructure; highways and transportation are the most striking infrastructure deficit; concerned about the strategic commitment of all organisations such as the Highways Agency to the timely planning, implementation and delivery of infrastructure; all infrastructure investment needed (including water supply and waste water infrastructure, healthcare, etc); major infrastructure work will be needed at Didcot; facilities and infrastructure should commensurate to individual developments.

40. Groups listed in PPS11 and Structure Plan consultees (see paragraph 35) raised the following key issues:

- Support general housing allocations as they do not require major development in the AONB, however concerned about the potential impact of development adjacent to the AONB. Support small scale housing development within the AONB for affordable

housing. Continue to press for green infrastructure (Chilterns AONB Conservation Board)

- Refer to previous comments regarding traffic demands on A34, M40 and those on employment at Bicester, Wantage/Grove and housing/employment balance around Didcot. Highways Agency undertaking an assessment of potential impact of new housing developments on trunk and motorway network to identify areas of concern, is not intended to identify specific infrastructure requirements but will work with local authorities to identify sustainable measures (Highways Agency)
- Support option 2 as it seeks to locate new housing in key areas of employment growth with opportunities for sustainable travel. Concerned that infrastructure provision keeps pace with growth (Thames Valley Economic Partnership)
- Employers are being hampered by shortage of housing for workforce, large proportions of people from Bicester, Didcot, Wantage/Grove commute to jobs. Would be social, economic and environmental advantages to development close to Oxford. Loss of green belt needs to be weighed up against these benefits (Oxfordshire Economic Partnership)
- Detailed comments submitted on water supply and waste water. Ongoing EA studies are required to confirm whether development at some locations can be accommodated. Supply at Bicester and Wantage/Grove to 2026 should be secured, investment will be needed, particularly for Wantage/Grove. Further studies needed for wastewater (Thames Water)
- Network Rail is not funded for significant enhancements, would appreciate assistance of authorities through LTPs and pooling of planning obligations to achieve necessary upgrades (Network Rail)
- Additional housing should be placed in Oxford City due to it being an employment area and lacking affordable housing, will also mean that people have less distance to travel to work (Oxford Bus Company)
- Concerns over the housing provision and the setting of housing requirements rather than the district housing distribution, the housing numbers in the consultation exercise are fixed with no scope for debate (House Builders Federation – Southern Region)
- Development on greenfield sites should be outside the green belt, the country towns strategy has benefited the whole county and the economic potential of Oxford should be shared (Oxford Green Belt Network)
- Doubt the need for 21,000 houses in Oxfordshire, green belt boundaries should be protected and inappropriate to allow development on Oxford City safeguarded land (CPRE – Oxfordshire)
- Wholly opposed to the idea of development within the Oxford Green Belt, will be at odds with national and local guidance, new development must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure which also addresses the backlog of investment (Oxford Preservation Trust)
- Broadly support option 1 but should be amended to allow some green belt release at transport nodes around Oxford. Any consideration of infrastructure needs to be based upon an accurate assessment of the baseline position (Church Commissioners)

41. Members of the public raised the following key issues:

- Protect the green belt around Oxford because traffic levels already too high in and around the city; too much activity is already centred on the city; need to protect the

historic setting of the city; development in the green belt will set a precedent (approximately 133 responses)

- Other options need to be addressed, such as Shipton Quarry, Kidlington/Begbroke/Yarnton and South of Grenoble Road
- Options put forward have not been properly explained
- Small towns and villages could accommodate development
- Major growth is needed at Oxford and the green belt places restrictions on the natural growth of Oxford; green belt boundaries could be amended and land taken out replaced elsewhere; city already has infrastructure, public transport and jobs
- There are brownfield sites that could be used in the county
- New jobs at Harwell and Milton Park will be taken up by houses already planned
- Suggest the development of a new town to accommodate 8,000 new homes
- Development at Bicester and Didcot will create dormitory towns
- Inadequate road and rail infrastructure for future development at Didcot and Wantage/Grove; infrastructure in Didcot will not support extra growth.

Conclusion:

42. In preparing its final advice to be submitted to SEERA the county council has taken into account the comments received on the consultation. On 1 November 2005 the county council debated the interim results of the consultation. The full results of the consultation were reported to the County Council's Cabinet on 6 December 2005. In helping to prepare its final advice the county council has taken into consideration comments made on alternative development locations and options, the amount of housing needed to be provided for, key issues regarding infrastructure and key technical advice from consultees such as Thames Water.